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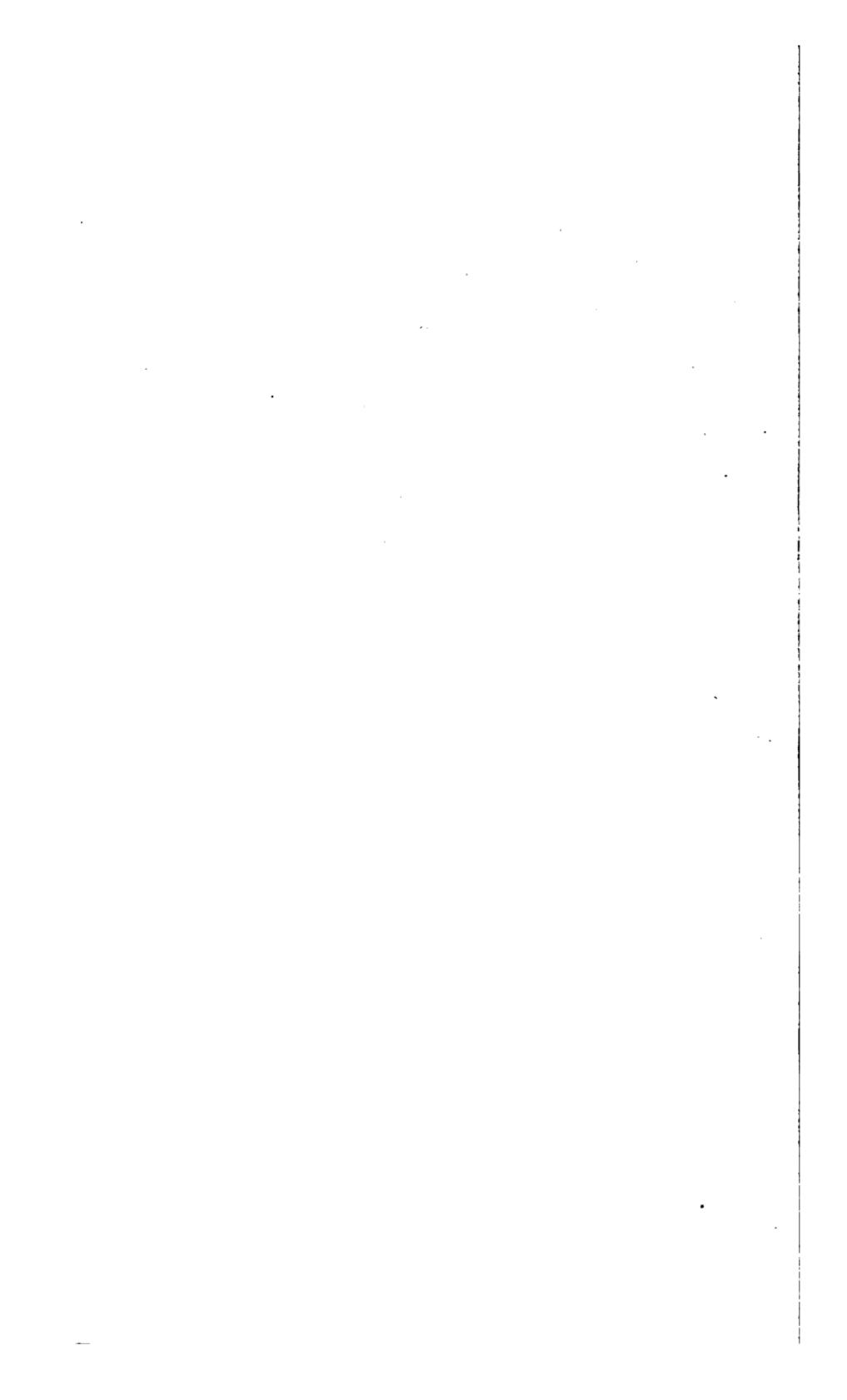
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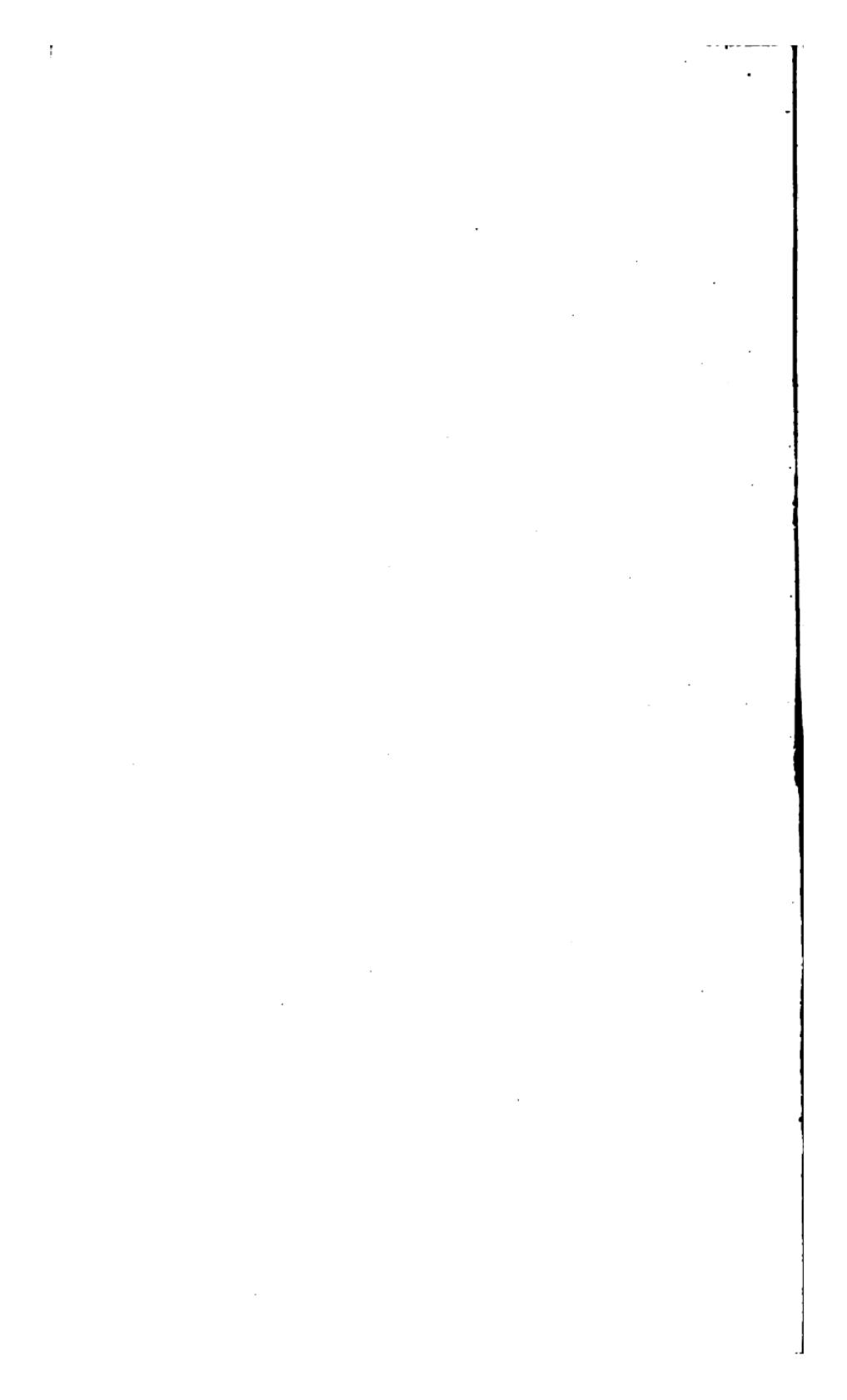


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HESTER KIRTON.

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HESTER KIRTON.

BY THE AUTHOR OF

“A BAD BEGINNING,” “CHESTERFORD,”

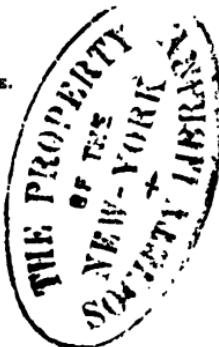
ETC. ETC.

[Mrs. K. S. Macquoid.]

He who the sword of Heaven will bear,
Should be as holy as severe ;—
More nor less to others paying,
Than by self-offences weighing.—SHAKSPEARE.

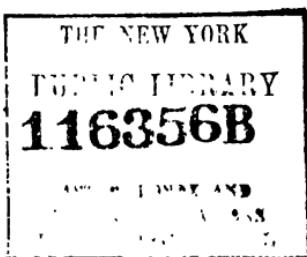
IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.



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T. B. P.



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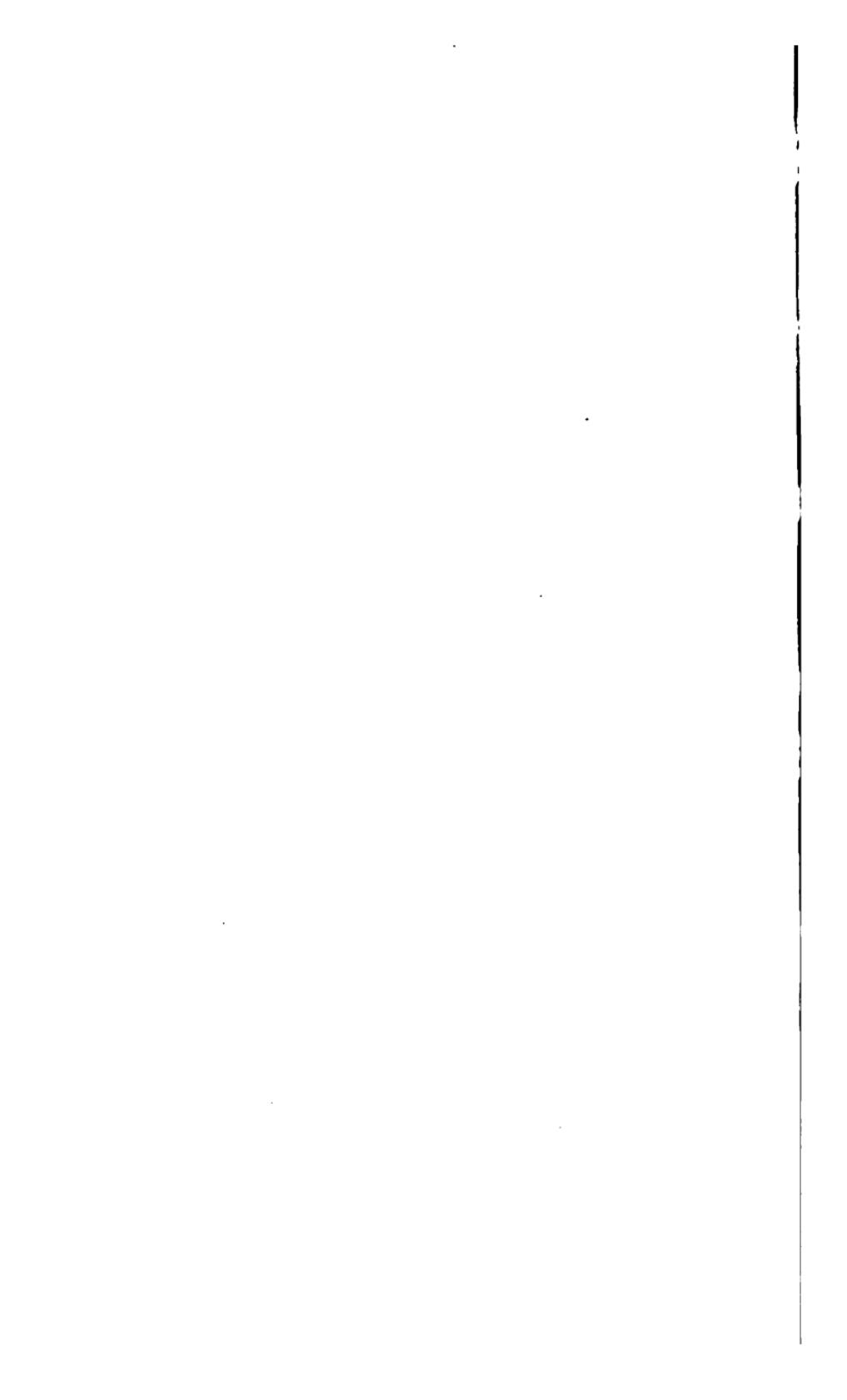
To *Him*

WHO ROUSED AND FOSTERED

A DORMANT TALENT,

I DEDICATE THIS BOOK,

WITH LOVING GRATITUDE.



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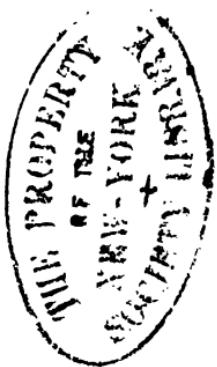
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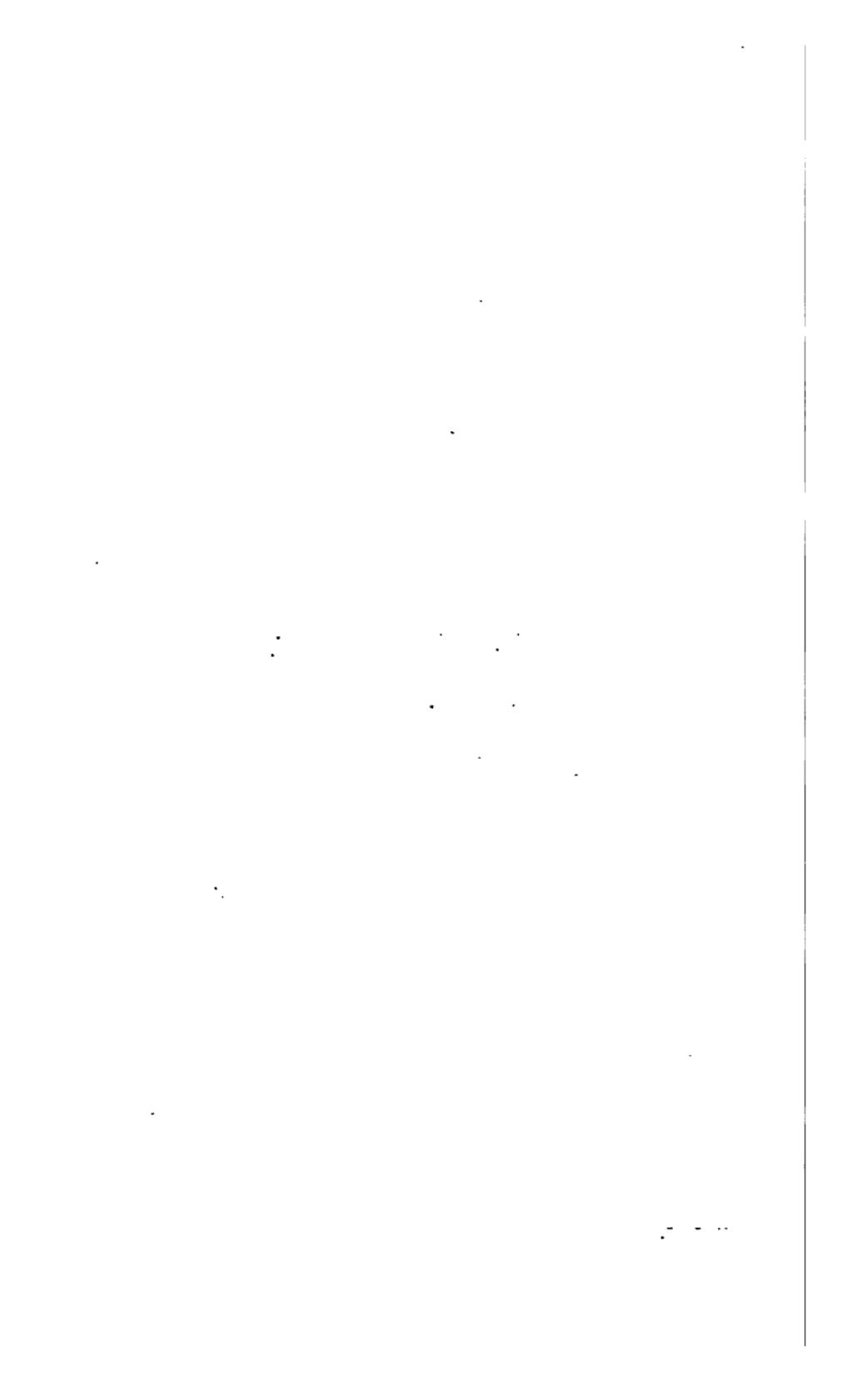
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BOOK THE FIRST.

KIRTON'S FARM.

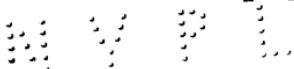


HESTER KIRTON.

CHAPTER I.

A VISITOR AT KIRTON'S FARM.

THE afternoon had been unusually sultry even for the hot autumn of 18—. The twisted chimneys on the gaily-tiled roof of the little station at Driven looked redder and harder-baked than ever, the gables seemed to stand up more sharply, the waved barge-boards looked thinner and more like cardboard; everything near and about glistened with an unnatural metallic radiance, even to the face of the ticket-taker,— a pale, insolent-looking fellow, with a sprouting beard under his chin, something like an unhealthy satyr, in a blue coat and pewter buttons.



The train had just puffed itself out of sight again ; the only passenger it had deposited, after looking at his coat-case, lounged through the station ; the surly ticket-taker saying he might, perhaps, see a lad outside to carry his trunk for him.

The traveller, a tall, fashionably-dressed man, and singularly handsome, stood looking, with a dismayed countenance, at the dusty road stretched out before him. There was no vehicle to be seen, but a boy was standing near the door, evidently on the look-out for a job.

“ How far to Kirton’s Farm, my man ? ”

“ May be a mwhile, may be moor—can’t tell’ee for sure,” replied the boy, sulkily. Perhaps he did not feel sulky, but those loutish country lads with blue eyes and yellow hair, who, after a gaping stare, always answer questions over their left shoulder, are somehow suggestive of sulkiness.

The traveller looked still more disconcerted.

“ I have a coat-case,” he said ; “ can you carry it ? ”

“ Show I wher’t bide un I’ll warn ye I’ll do’t,” said the boy : he looked far less surly now.

The coat-case, a new dandified affair of solid



leather, studded with large brass knobs, was soon on the lad's sturdy shoulder.

“Be ye thinking to bide at Kirton's Farm?”

“Yes, till to-morrow.”

The boy grinned.

“I suppose Mr. Kirton has visitors sometimes?”

“I dwoan't know as ever the time is then,” said the boy, chuckling. “Vis'tors! whoy, he be a mwiser, he be; an old skinflint, as rich as a Jew, though they do tell——”

“There is a daughter—Miss Kirton—is there not?” asked Mr. Hallam.

“Auh! Muss Heaster, do'ee mean? Well, 'ees, but ne'er a body sees much o' she. The owld man he kips she at whoam; folks do say as how he grudges the money to buy she gownds and such like fit to be seed in.”

“Is that what you mean by calling him a miser?” said the gentleman, much amused.

“Ior' love 'ee, that bean't half.” The boy fairly turned to look at him, for the corner of the portmanteau had hitherto intervened. “Whoy, a mwiser's a deal more nor that; whoy, I'm blessed if he wouldn't like to make folk live on cheese-parings and bacon-rinds, washed down wi' water.

The men thay know 'un so well there bean't a one among 'em as 'ud meal in th' house if he could help it ; it's a mortal wonder Muss Heaster and th' owld 'ooman wurn't starved long ago, and hisself too."

Mr. Hallam seemed to ponder over this information ; his pace slackened, and he let the boy get ahead of him ; perhaps he was considering whether he should find bacon-rinds and cheese-parings digestible. However, his mental colloquy, whatever might have been its subject, was apparently satisfactory ; for, when they turned into a shady lane which the boy announced as the approach to the farm, he looked far more cheerful than when plodding along the dusty road.

Perhaps the relief from glaring sunshine might have occasioned this ; besides, the traveller was keenly alive to natural beauties, and the hawthorn hedge-banks between which he walked were covered with a profusion of wild flowers.

It was early autumn, so the colouring was bright and varied, making up by these qualities for the absence of the exquisite delicacy of the spring blossoms.

There were, abundantly, the gay scarlet poppy,

the untidy white bladder campion, the starry yellow elecampane; the honeysuckle, springing loftily above all, enfolding many an unwary spray of hawthorn in its perfumed but deadly embrace; while at intervals shone out wreaths of the glossy-leaved black bryony, whose dark green, shining leaves reflected its bunches of poisonous berries, fast assuming their many coloured tints. Lightly, here and there, the white bryony hung in festoons: that "Honesty is the best policy" seems exemplified in this plant; it always manages to get the best place.

A clamorous barking of dogs soon told whereabouts the house was; but for this, it might have been supposed a good way farther off still, it was so completely concealed by a thick plantation of young oaks; one very gigantic tree at the gate spread its broad branches quite across the lane, making it shadier still. Looking along the lane, which appeared to run a mile or more beyond the farmhouse, the hedges were stunted and the country on either side more open; and as the chalky path looked hot and white in the blazing sunshine, Mr. Hallam congratulated himself that his journey ended here.

But the trees did not extend beyond the gate ; from which an ill-kept stony road led straight to the house itself.

Mr. Hallam shivered as the kid of his new boots jarred and scraped against the rough bits of granite scattered along the road, and for some seconds he was so occupied in picking his way that he did not look up at the house.

When he did raise his handsome blue eyes, he saw before him a quaint, half-timbered manor-house, evidently of ancient construction. The timbers, above and below the windows, were set in a semi-circular form, producing alternate crosses and circles along the front ; and if the spaces between them had not been barbarously whitewashed, would have been picturesque enough ; the house was surmounted by three irregular gables, the centre one being much the smallest. The windows of projecting lattice-work—filled with very small diamond-shaped panes—were supported on brackets, and extended across the front from one gable-end to the other ; clumsy iron contrivances for keeping the lattices open hung loosely from the lower part of the frames, and looked cumbrous enough to drag window-frame and all along with them.

The door was of later date, having as heading a depressed arch of solid oak.

Framed in verdure, the old farmhouse would have made a charming picture, but standing thus alone, with only a large pig-yard, knee-deep in black mud, on one side, behind that again a formal, stiff rick-yard, and on the other one field seen stretching away after another into flat distance, it looked bald and cold—there was nothing to relieve the eye but the deep blue sky, against which the whitewashed walls stood out hard and chalky.

Probably in the rear of the premises there were barns, with tiled or thatched roofs glowing with the rich and varied hues successive July suns had burned in or on to them; and picturesque carts, and waggons, and smock-frocked farm-labourers might doubtless have been found also; but Mr. Hallam was far too tired of his dusty walk to wish to prolong it, so he pushed open the little white wicket-gate in the low fence that enclosed a neglected grass-plot in front of the house, walked up the stony path in the middle of it, and rang a broken bell-handle beside the entrance door.

While he was speaking to his guide, who seemed in a great hurry to get away, the door opened slowly, and an old woman appeared in the entrance.

She held the door firmly with one hand, as if to prevent ingress; but as she scanned the stranger inquiringly, she seemed satisfied that he had no evil intentions, and looked more placable —by nature she was evidently not meant to be cross; she was short and stout, with a cheerful, dark complexion, bright black eyes, and a merry looking mouth, that seemed as if it ought to be more ready with a jest than with a reproof; but suddenly catching sight of the boy, her whole expression changed to one of peevish discontent.

“And what do ‘ee want here, yer oudacious young vagabond, stabbleing about the place. Mischief, I’ll lay, when ye knows better nor I can tell ‘ee, that Muster Kirton, he can’t stomach a boy about the place.”

“Well, I be a-goin’, Biz, so you’ve no call to scold,” and he held out his hand as Mr. Hallam extended his towards him. He gave a shrill whistle of delight when he saw a shilling in his palm, and, bounding off, was soon out of sight.

“ Drat thay boys—ye'll maybe excuse me for saying so, sir—but they're allus where they shouldn't ought to be, and in pettickler here they bean't not allowed. Be ye a-wishin' to speak to the muster ? ”

Before Hallam could reply, the old woman was put on one side, and a very tall grey-headed man took her place, and looked keenly and suspiciously at the stranger.

Spite of what he had heard in London, and of the boy's hints about Mr. Kirton, Frederic Hallam was pleased with his appearance; his clear complexion and benevolent forehead were not those generally belonging to a mean character; but there was a thinness in the lips, and a rigid firmness in the lower jaw, that in one more skilled in human nature might have awakened doubts.

He glanced from the young man's open, handsome face to his dress, and thence to his portmanteau.

Hallam raised his hat, and began to introduce himself, but Mr. Kirton stopped him.

“ You mistake, sir ; this is no inn for travellers.”

“ Mr. Kirton, I conclude ; if you will be so

kind as to look at this note, you will see that I do not come to you quite as a stranger."

The old man drew his tall form up more stiffly still, and pressed his lips more tightly together. As the letter was handed to him, he eyed Hallam so closely again before he opened it, that he added,—

"The letter is from your friend Mr. Goldsmith, who has entrusted me with some business papers he wishes you to sign."

Mr. Kirton opened the envelope, and read his letter slowly, keeping his visitor standing in the sunshine all the time. He was inwardly chafing, and had a great mind to ask permission to enter; but there was something so rigid and unbending about the old farmer, that he forbore.

When he had read it twice over, his countenance relaxed a little, and he invited Hallam to come in and rest himself. The visitor looked at his portmanteau reposing ignominiously on the grass-plot; he was just going to ask Mr. Kirton to have it carried indoors, when the farmer said,—

"You can let that be—it's safe: when you have eaten a meal with us and rested, one of the men shall carry it where you will."

Frederic Hallam was not easily daunted; he

had generally, as he would have said, impudence enough for anything; but his wish to become the farmer's guest just then prevailed: he would not risk a dispute with the reputed miser, which might injure his plans, though he shuddered at the thought of leaving his new portmanteau exposed to the inroads of dogs and fowls—some of the latter, ugly, bony-legged creatures, had begun to peck it already; but he was obliged to follow Mr. Kirton, who strode along the narrow, stone-flagged, whitewashed passage to the back of the house, where he threw open a door, and asked his visitor to walk in and sit down. Hallam gave him a packet, which he took almost rudely, and then left him abruptly.

There was a stone floor and no carpet in the great, gaunt apartment—it could hardly be called a room—in former times, probably the hall of the old manor-house; for tradition said that Kirton's Farm had been a favourite hunting seat of King John's—a legend hard to credit when one contemplated the entirely arable nature of the surrounding country. Doubtless, the house, or some part of it, was very ancient, and the hall, as it was called, seemed to have been left in undisturbed

possession of its antiquity: the walls were of dark, almost black, oak, panelled in small, octagonal compartments; the three windows were deeply recessed and considerably splayed, so that, although the external aperture was small, the window recess itself would have formed a seat for several persons; two long rough wooden trestles stood against the wall on one side—they had possibly supported the table planks of former times—and at intervals were ranged high oaken stools, as black and ancient-looking as the hall itself. What the roof had been formerly, it was now difficult to determine, as it was ceiled between the three oak beams that spanned it at intervals; but its blackened aspect made one think irresistibly of a smoky chimney, and drew attention to the fire-place. Hallam had never met with anything of the kind before, and he walked up to it, and examined it closely. It must have been eight or nine feet across, and had on each side niches with seats cut in the solid wall; in the centre, from the red brick paving, rose two huge, ungainly metal dogs, each supporting what looked very like a cannon-ball; at the back was a massive plate of iron wrought in grotesque devices, and between

this and the front, on a small raised brick platform, were two smaller andirons ; from the chimney itself hung a hook, such a hook as Giant Cormoran thrust down the chimney when he roused the indignation of Jack the Giant Killer.

Mr. Hallam, being essentially a man of this generation, was not romantic, and he shuddered when he thought of the ways of former times, and of the uncouth feeding this hall had probably witnessed ; he hoped the rest of the house looked more habitable than this barbarous relic of the past, for he still intended to carry his point of passing the night there.

He was growing tired of waiting in such a dungeon, and although the stone floor was cool after his dusty walk, the oak settles were most uninviting to a tired traveller.

A shuffling sound in the passage, and then the old servant appeared with a large coarse yellow jug in her hand.

“ The master 'ud like to see ye in his room. I thought, maybe, you'd be dry arter your walk, sir, so I brought ye a drink o' water.”

Hallam, who really was very thirsty, and had advanced eagerly for, as he supposed, a draught of

“home-brewed,” fell back with a strong expression of disgust.

“Water, my good woman? no, thank you, I’m not fond of water; I’m afraid if I tried it, I might astonish my inside.”

“Well, to be sure, now,” said the old woman, peevishly, “and I thought ye’d be glad of a drink—some folks is more nice than wise, maybe. I likes water better nor beer any day.”

“I’m sure I am particularly obliged to you,” said Hallam, who never offended any one if he could help it, on the ground that you cannot tell who may turn out useful to you in the end; “but I wonder now if you could be so very kind as to find me water for another purpose—I mean, to wash my hands and face before dinner.”

She laughed.

“Soap and water costs nothin’, so ‘ees welcome to as much o’ that as ye like; come along this way, and I’ll find ‘ee a cloth.”

To Mr. Hallam’s mingled dismay and amusement, she led him into the kitchen, another huge, stone-flagged place. It was evidently as old as the hall; they probably formed the nucleus around which the rest of the house had grown. It was

open to the roof, with massive dust-covered rafters running across; to one of which was fixed a rack, filled with numerous sides of bacon; while hams, pig's faces, onions, &c., hung from the others. On one end of the rough kitchen-table, she set a yellow basin of the same coarse ware as the jug, a great piece of mottled soap, and a rough, but clean jack-towel. Mr. Hallam looked aghast, but he was not really effeminate, though he did not mind being thought so, and, pulling off his coat and carefully shielding his scarf and waistcoat with the towel, he gave his face and whiskers a sluicing that fairly astonished Biz, and splashed her table considerably.

“ Well, you be a brave 'un at the water, you be; ye takes to it like a spannel. I thought somehow ye'd be too much of a coddle like for that sort o' thing.”

“ And why did you think so—Biz, I think the boy called you?”

He had special reasons for wishing to ingratiate himself with the old servant.

“ Well, I dunno; there was somethink or other about 'ee as minded I of a cat—no offence—whiskers an' all, as 'ee came picking yer way up the road, just as if yer boots wur made o' egg-shells.”

Hallam burst out laughing.

“ Well done, Biz. What’s your real name? That’s a nickname, I suppose.”

“ ‘Ere-a-mussy—’tain’t a name at all. I wur christened Elizabeth, but Muss Heaster, her found Biz wurn’t so hard when her wur a little ‘un.”

“ Ah, I see; but really, Biz, you ought to have a better approach made to the house,” and then, to her great amusement, he pulled out of its rose-coloured, morocco case an elegant little pocket-comb, and, marching up to the brilliant array of dish-covers, one of the few ornaments of the kitchen, began to arrange and comb out to their full length his silky, auburn whiskers. “ Now, look at my boots,” he said, raising one foot on to the kitchen-table. “ A woman of your experience, Biz, knows better than I can tell you, that that boot’s destroyed—isn’t, in fact, fit to wear again; to me, as it happens, it isn’t of much consequence, but suppose it had been a poor fellow to whom a pair of boots was an object—it’s painful to reflect upon it, it is really, Biz,” and then, pocketing his comb, he washed his hands, carefully polishing each finger-nail separately with his pocket-handkerchief, and put on his coat.

CHAPTER II.

HESTER.

MR. KIRTON's study was a small room about eight feet square, little better than a closet, evidently constructed in the thickness of what had once been the outer wall, for it could only be entered from the front parlour, the door of which, as Hallam's quick eye told him, was next to that leading into the kitchen, which lay between the parlour and the hall on the left-hand side of the house; the rooms on the other side were empty, and never used except for lumber.

Biz hurried him through the parlour, so that he could only see that it was panelled in black oak like the hall, looked dingy and uninhabited, and had a smell of close air about it. He found Mr. Kirton seated on a high stool at his desk, poring over some papers. He looked up at Hallam, and motioned him to sit down.

“Have you been long in Mr. Goldsmith’s office?”

Hallam slightly coloured.

“Does Mr. Goldsmith say I have been in his office?”

“No, he does not say so, but that doesn’t answer me.”

“I am only a trusted friend of Mr. Goldsmith’s, not one of his clerks.”

“Then what on earth does he send you down here for?” said Mr. Kirton, rudely.

“I came here to witness your signature to those papers I gave you, and, if necessary, to sign anything you wish attested.”

“True, true,” the old man muttered; “but he should not have sent a stranger—he knows I can’t endure strangers—no offence to you, sir.”

“I am extremely sorry; how very wrong in Goldsmith, for I suppose he’s aware of this dislike of yours?”

“Well, never mind if he is—it’s done now.” Mr. Kirton disliked what he called “palaver” worse than strangers. “We’d best get business over before dinner-time.”

Hallam thought the signing, and blotting, and

folding would never be over, then Mr. Kirton bid him, almost sternly, put the papers up carefully, as they belonged to Mr. Goldsmith.

“Not that they are of any particular value,” he added, keeping his eyes keenly fixed on the young man, “but it would be troublesome to Mr. Goldsmith to replace them—troublesome, nothing more.”

A curious clashing sound seemed to come from the wall; the old man made an attempt at a smile.

“That is Biz’s signal to dinner. You see, sir, we’re humbler folk than you’re used to, I reckon: we’ve no dining-parlours nor drawing-rooms here; we eat in the kitchen, and get our victuals hot and hot.”

If Hallam had not been determined to dine at Kirton’s Farm, this announcement would probably have induced him to take his departure at once; but, spite of the shocks his fastidious refinement had received, he began to consider the whole affair a good joke and a new phase of life, and resolved to see the end of it.

He followed the old farmer along the stone passage into the kitchen; a coarse cloth was spread on the table, garnished with green-handled

knives and forks, and common white plates and dishes. But Mr. Hallam's attention was attracted by a young girl who stood at her place on one side of the table, evidently waiting for them.

He bowed, and she made a sort of movement in return. Mr. Kirton did not seem to think any introduction necessary, but pointed to a seat opposite his daughter, whom he called Hester.

Hallam could not take his eyes from her face; he had determined to find her agreeable, but he was surprised to see her so pretty.

She was apparently about sixteen years old, and her tall undeveloped figure gave promise of much symmetry; her features were small and regular, and her clear hazel eyes full of expression, but what most surprised the critical Londoner, accustomed to polished society, was her self-possession. Although quiet, her manner was neither constrained nor awkward.

"She is not conceited, thank Heaven," said Hallam to himself; he felt almost piqued by her apparent indifference to the evidently unusual presence of a stranger.

A deeper thinker would, perhaps, have noted the firm-set jaw and chin which gave too much

squareness to the lower part of the face, contradicting the delicate chiselling of the nose and lips, and would possibly have looked for more masculine defects than conceit; not that I would imply conceit to be the sole inheritance of women: with far less excuse men are just as vain as they are, and it sits worse on them —it comes out more broadly, whereas a woman will clothe her infirmity in such a mantle of graceful nonsense that it often seems to add to her charms.

The dinner was meagre enough—a straggling raw-boned fowl, evidently a patriarch of the farm-yard, and a large piece of bacon, or rather of bacon fat, for lean was not visible, surrounded with greens, which gave out a strong unsavoury smell. However, the Londoner tried to make the best of it, and carved the greasy bacon as though it had been a choicer dish.

Miss Kirton only replied in monosyllables to his conversational attempts, and he began to think her face was the best part of her.

The old man noticed how carefully he was watching her.

“She has not had much schooling,” he said,

“but she can make butter, or pudding and pie, with the best o’ ‘em.”

“Very useful accomplishments,” said Hallam, with an inward shudder.

Biz, who was in the act of pouring out a glass of ale for the visitor, nodded her head approvingly, but Hester coloured and it seemed more from annoyance than from shyness.

“Never mind about me, father; the gentleman wants to drink his ale.”

Hallam started; she spoke broadly, almost with the accent of a peasant; he now remarked, what her very pretty face had prevented him from seeing before, that her hands, although small, were coarse and red, evidently from exposure. He noticed her gown, too; an ill-made, washed-out pink gingham, which she had grown too tall for, the waist being much too short, and some tucks had been “let out” in the skirt, as was apparent by the fresher colour about midway down. She scarcely spoke again except to answer her father about household matters; her voice was low and soft, but her manner in speaking was so singularly harsh and abrupt that Mr. Hallam was glad when she ceased, for either this, or the red hands or

the pudding making, had dispelled his first illusion, and the ale, scarcely better than vinegar, completed his discomfiture.

“ You don’t seem famous for road-making hereabouts,” he said to Mr. Kirton.

“ The roads are well enough—they’re mostly wanted for carts and such like.”

“ They are not very favourable for shoe-leather. Don’t you find that the stones knock out your boots terribly, Miss Kirton ? ”

“ No, I don’t,” she said, shortly, without looking at him.

“ I expect,” said Kirton, with a smile, “ that Hester’s boots are more likely to knock the stones out than they are to knock out her boots; my girl wears clumpers, Mr. Hallam, none of your dandified Paris kids, as I see ‘em called in the newspapers.”

Hester reddened again and looked angrily at her father, but he went on without heeding her.

“ You see we’re poor homely folks, sir, and in clothes and such like we have to choose for wear and not for outside show, which I take it is what you mostly care for in London. You ain’t much used to the country, I should say ? ”

"Except when I take a few weeks' shooting, I confess I don't know much about it—but I've a great idea, Mr. Kirton, that I should take to farming immensely: I like anything practical."

"Oh, you do, do you?" said the farmer, looking hard at him. "If I may be so bold, what's your particular line of business now?"

Something in the old man's manner disconcerted Hallam; he seemed, behind his affected humility, to be indulging in a grim sneer at the Londoner, and to suspect his intentions, so that he answered with less than his usual self-possession.

"I am in the Colonial Office—a very good place, you know, as one is sure of getting on."

"Oh! that's it, is it?" said the old man. "You be one of them gentlemen as must wear good clothes, and keep respectable, and read the papers, and write a few letters, all at the country's expense; and I don't doubt now but what you think you work uncommon hard."

"I work as hard as a gentleman need work, I believe," said Hallam, nettled out of his indifference.

"Gentleman, indeed! Now look you here,

young man ; no offence, but such a gentleman as you are, I take it, is uncommon like a butterfly as never does nothing to earn his own bread, it's all set ready for him. I'm a plain-spoken man, you see."

"Oh," said Hallam, laughing, for he was very good-tempered, "you only consider gentlemen worthy of the name who live on their own property, and derive their income from their own acres."

"Not exactly," said Kirton ; "nothing can make a man a gentleman who is not born one ; all the borrowed feathers in the world won't do that," he added, looking hard at Hallam. "He may rub against other gentlemen, and get some of their polish, but it comes off again, man, at a hard rub—it comes off. Even for a born gentleman, I take it, an idle life is the worst thing that can happen to him ; but for one who's not quite sure what he is, work, sir, work, is the likeliest thing to happen him into what he wants."

Hallam gulped down these very distasteful observations and advice in the best way he could.

"You are a very keen observer," he said, "and

have seen a good deal of life, I should think. By-the-by," he continued, for the seriousness oppressed him, "do you ever bring Miss Hester to London? I should be charmed to show you some of the sights when next you come up," he added, looking at her; but as he said it, a vision of walking with that pink gingham gown in the streets of London, almost made him shudder.

" You are very good, sir—I may say too good—to people you never saw before; but we've friends of our own in London, poor and humble though we be, and should be loath to trouble strangers." This was said rather proudly. " Hester," he added, sharply, for she was sitting with her eyes now fixed intently on Hallam, " those chickens ought to be fed again."

Hester started; she rose without a word, and left the kitchen by a door which apparently led into the yard.

There was silence for a few minutes. Hallam wished she would return; he had been quite aware that she had been looking at him—poor little thing, it was but natural: of course she had never seen any one like him before. Yes, it was quite possible that a little judicious training

might obviate the very harsh way in which she spoke, and other defects of her position.

The pause continued, and he became sensible that Mr. Kirton was waiting for him to speak.

“What do you do with yourself after dinner, Mr. Kirton?” he said, in a jovial, confidential manner, “do you smoke? If you have no objection, I should like to take a turn round your farm with you this afternoon.”

“Very like you would,” said the farmer, drily; “but I ha’ not got the time to spare, I’m afeard, and I don’t smoke, and maybe you’ll miss the next train to London if you don’t look sharp.” And then before Hallam could reply, “I’ll go and get a lad to carry your trunk,” and he was gone, leaving his guest with the conviction that he must yield his point. Biz, who was in the wash-house built out into the yard, already busy washing her dishes, came in, wiping her hands on her apron as soon as she heard her master leave the kitchen.

“Good-by, Biz, I’m going. I hope to see you again some day.”

“Well, sir, and you’ll be welcome to come for my part, if the muster’s agreeable.”

“Oh, yes, Biz; I feel sure Mr. Kirton will be always glad to see me. Perhaps you’ll find me a bed next time I come.”

Biz shook her head, and looked at him curiously.

“If I was you, sir, and I comed again, I’d put up at the Bells down at Driven; it’s a tidy little place enough.”

“Ah, I’ll see about that; but I say, Biz, I’d no notion your young lady was so pretty—I never expected to see so charming a girl in this old out-of-the-way place.”

“Didn’t you, though?” said Biz; “there now, and I believe muster thinks you’ve comed a purpose.”

“O’ purpose for what?” said Hallam, laughing to hide his consciousness.

“Why, to make love like to Muss Heaster. Didn’t ye see how sharp he sent her to the chickens?”

“That’s an excellent joke,” said Hallam, “when I came down here to oblige Mr. Goldsmith. I grant you Miss Hester is quite pretty enough to tempt any one to come from London to see her, but then you see, Biz, I didn’t know it.”

“ Well, to be sure,” said Biz; “ that’s what I’ve telled muster about mewing her up so, over and over again, and he won’t listen. He ought to let her go about a bit, and have better gownds, and a little pleasuring like others; the poor child’s reg’lar moped. Whoy, I believe you be the first real gentleman as she’s ever seed, let alone spoke to.”

“ Really!” and Hallam was going to ask more questions, but Mr. Kirton’s entrance, with the intelligence that a lad was at the front door ready to go with him to the station, interrupted any further talk. As Kirton turned to lead the way, Hallam hastily slid some money into Biz’s hand, and after taking a courteous leave of his host, whom he found waiting for him in the entrance passage, he returned to the station, considerably mortified at not having been able to instal himself as a visitor at Kirton’s Farm. Still he felt he had an ally in Biz, and he hoped a favourable impression had been made on Hester.

CHAPTER III.

FREDERIC HALLAM AND HIS LAWYER.

MR. GOLDSMITH was a lawyer of much good, and also of much evil, repute. So far as the good went, he had an unexceptionable, well-appointed house in Regent's Park, kept by his two maiden sisters—good, quiet, religious women; a perfect brougham, of the last new pattern, and some capital horses; his dinners and his wine were pronounced excellent by experienced judges; he had a small but choice collection of pictures by modern artists. His library was filled with curiosities and rarities he had collected in his continental trips; these took, in fact, the place of books there. Mr. Goldsmith studied human nature more than books; he subscribed largely to all the public charities; his name was sure to be seen among those of the stewards at public dinners, and was frequent in

committee lists and those of vice-patrons ; and last, not least by any means in this generation, his wealth was said to be unbounded. There were people who said that the Miss Goldsmiths did not dress plainly from religious scruples, but from necessity, and that it seemed hard, with all their brother's wealth, that they should have each but an allowance of twenty pounds a year, while the butler pocketed seventy. Also these evil-minded people said that the rich lawyer's morality was not so correct as he strove to make it appear ; but these were minor charges. Others said, the law was not such a profitable business as Mr. Goldsmith appeared to have found it, and that an office might be made useful for one kind of business as well as another ; at any rate the least that could be said was that Goldsmith had a very lucky way of investing money.

He was a man with an immense circle of acquaintances and not one intimate friend, except the old farmer, Ralph Kirton. They had been schoolfellows : Kirton had remained country-bred, having by his excessive skill in farming and his parsimony scraped together a large fortune ; while his friend had become a polished Londoner, and at

the same time a man of substance. It was wonderful that so keenly suspicious a nature as Kirton's should bring himself to trust his money with any one; but old friendship, and the hope of increasing his hoards, had induced the farmer to let Goldsmith have the greater part of his wealth to invest.

The lawyer was just now sitting in his office, deep in thought or calculation; perhaps he was not frowning enough for the latter. He was of middle height, broad and stout, and might have been called powerfully made about the shoulders, but for his excessive circumference below the waist, the effect of which he enhanced by wearing an erect shirt frill, something like a white cockscomb; there was a Jewish look in his face; his eyes projected slightly; but his most prominent feature was his shallow chin, which trebled itself before it reached his spotless white neckcloth.

The office was a quiet, homely place enough; two sides of it were filled with rows of tin boxes, labelled with the names and initials of clients; and in one corner was a huge iron safe, doubtless containing some extra valuable documents.

The other two sides were occupied by the fire-

place, over which hung a map, and the large table, covered with papers and parchments, at which he was sitting. There were two doors, one facing him, which led on to the staircase, for his office was on the first floor, his clerks occupying the lower story, and one close by the table leading to an inner sanctum; the window did not tempt a second glance, as it looked down into a sort of square well, formed by three whitewashed walls besides its own.

There was a smart tap at the door, and Mr. Hallam entered.

He seemed on friendly terms with the lawyer, for they shook hands, and the young man at once pulled a chair close to Mr. Goldsmith's and seated himself.

"First of all," he said, unbuttoning his coat, "I'll hand you over your confounded papers; a nice dance to lead a fellow broiling along a dusty road twice in a day; why, I thought at least I should get a bed and a few days' country air," and he pulled and petted his whiskers as if consoling them for their loss.

"Bless me!" Goldsmith affected extreme astonishment; "you don't mean to say you didn't

sleep one night there! How very inhospitable! Well, I'm quite surprised; I really am."

"No! are you though?" and Hallam's brow cleared in an instant. "I confess I thought you knew how matters stood, and sent me down by way of hoaxing me."

"My dear sir!" and Goldsmith raised his hands deprecatingly.

"Well, never mind; what's done and ended can't be mended. Anyhow it was a horrid bore, and I bought a new portmanteau on purpose; and then as soon as we had dined—I say, Goldsmith, you wouldn't have liked the dinner, I can tell you—old Kirton told me I should be late for the train."

Goldsmith laughed till his yellow chin shook like a jelly; but he suddenly checked himself, for Hallam only joined faintly in his merriment, and asked whether he had seen Miss Kirton.

"Yes, by Jove! that made up a little. I forgot to tell you I accomplished that, and she's an uncommon pretty creature, quite a child though."

"She must be about eighteen or nineteen, I think."

"Well, she may be, it's hard to tell, and perhaps

being kept shut up may make her seem younger; the servant, a queer old fish, told me she sees no one."

"Ah, is that it? I understand now the reason of my friend Kirton's inhospitality: he was afraid so very charming a gentleman might leave too deep an impression on the heart of his daughter."

"By Jove, I wish I could think so, but she's wonderfully self-possessed, and seems as cold as a statue; if you're her guardian, Goldsmith, you should see to her, she really wants seeing after; why, she wears a gown like a charity girl."

"So much the better, if you have really serious thoughts about her; the less attractive she is, the more chance for you to go in quickly and win. I gave you the opportunity of seeing her; you said you must marry a fortune, and I think I may say hers will be something better than a common one, but as to Ralph Kirton ever consenting to such a thing as giving her a farthing till he dies, you may ~~whistle~~ for that, Master Fred."

"What's to be done, then? Shall I run away with her?"

Mr. Goldsmith again raised his hands and his eyes.

“ To listen to you young men—well—well—well, and if you took so very rash and altogether improper a step in defiance of his wishes, have you not already seen enough of Ralph Kirton to be sure he would leave his money to a hospital or a charitable institution, in short, to any thing or body but his daughter? Why, sir, his will’s something like that poker, only far more unbending.”

“ Well, then, what do you advise me to do ? ”

“ Are you consulting me professionally ? ”

“ I don’t care ; anyhow, so that I get an answer,” said Hallam, laughing.

“ Then I’ll tell you something ; but, mind, don’t you let this out to Captain Fortescue and half a dozen others.”

“ All right ; I can keep a secret when I choose.”

“ Very well ; it is to your own interest to keep this. My good old friend has a heart complaint, and, consequently, his life is ~~very~~ bad one, although he steadily ignores the fact spite of warning attacks, and this is why ~~I~~—of course feeling a deep interest in Hester—am anxious to provide her with a kind husband and a suitable

home whenever she is left an orphan, and the only plan I could think of for compassing this end was that which I have adopted, namely, of letting you see her. You see I speak unreservedly, Mr. Hallam; I must feel a deep interest in the poor child, and I hope I am not mistaken in supposing if you can gain her affection that you will make her a good and considerate husband."

And having delivered this ingenuous explanation of his motives, Mr. Goldsmith flourished his cambric handkerchief, redolent of the very best eau-de-Cologne—he never used fashionable scents in business hours, it was unprofessional.

Hallam looked hard at him, but his face was hidden by his handkerchief; probably the youth was of a sceptical turn of mind, for he seemed inclined to laugh at Mr. Goldsmith's tender interest in Hester's future. Or he might, indeed, have had some good reason for his disbelief.

"Then am ~~you~~ understood that I have to go on waiting and waiting till Mr. Kirtton chooses to die and leave his daughter free to marry?"

The lawyer nodded.

"And how, my good sir, am I to make sure in

the meantime that some one does not quietly step in and carry off the prize?"

"Trust that to me. Kirton has so much dread, and justly, of the effect of excitement, that he, as you heard, never admits any visitors, certainly no strangers. I wish I could say I thought you had long to wait, for I love and respect my old friend very much, very much indeed; so set your mind at rest, and leave it all to me."

Mr. Hallam saw that his visit was considered ended, and he rose to go away; but as he reached the door which the lawyer held open for him, a new thought seemed to strike him.

"I say, Goldsmith, of course I don't mean to doubt you, but looking at it purely in the light of business, I've no assurance that you'll keep your memory fresh in this matter."

"My dear friend—ha! ha! ha!—good, good—you young men have wonderful old heads on your shoulders, I declare. Let me see: what assurance can I give you? I tell you what, if I don't keep faith with you in this matter you may strike one out of the three thousand pounds you owe me."

"Will you write it?"

“ By all means, if you wish.”

And so the promise was written, signed, and duly stowed away in Frederic Hallam’s pocket-book among various other small documents which, probably, he would have been as unwilling to submit to public inspection as this one. People would have wondered more even than they did at his uniformly sunny temper and gay light-heartedness, if they could have known in how serious and threatening a shape he carried the black witch, money-worry, next his heart in that pocket-book ; of course, had his debts been inevitable, one must have admired the hopeful spirit with which he bore them. But they were not ; they were the result of self-indulgent extravagance and of that fatal pastime which prevents many a young man from marrying now-a-days—a betting-book.

His father, a fashionable London barrister, was the son of parents who had worked their way up to wealth from “ the ranks,” and when they had spent a small fortune on making their son a gentleman, were mortified to find that he never asked them to his fine West End house from their quiet retreat in the Mile End Road, to meet his grand friends.

This was probably to be attributed to his wife's influence, for he was a dutiful, affectionate son before his marriage; but young Mrs. Hallam, who also sprang from a *parvenu* race, was determined to obliterate every trace of such misfortunes, both on her husband's side and her own.

And in her case it seemed easy: she came from a distant county, but therefore suffered from the double disadvantage of provincial narrow-mindedness and that restless assumption and self-assertion which seems to beset some people when they or their families have risen in position; possibly they cannot help it: like people of undecided minds settling in a new house, they take a long time to get used to it and cannot let things take their course and shake down easily.

However it might have been, young Mrs. Hallam "gave herself airs." Perhaps if she had only known how fast news travels in these days, she might have been more cautious, and instead of talking of her father as a landed gentleman, who lived on his property, she might have remembered who and what was her grandfather, and, indeed, the early beginning of the very landed gentleman himself. But what she did for herself was sur-

passed by the efforts of her sister-in-law, who (in far too much terror of her brother to tell any stories about her own family, for, although Frederic Hallam the elder gave way to his wife, he always gloried in the fact that he owed everything to his father and mother) trumpeted forth the riches and grandeur and position of Mrs. Hallam's young family and relatives, till she established them in the minds of her friends as well-born old county people, and as no one could be so rude as to tell her the truth and that she was deceiving herself, she remained for many years in comfortable and self-complacent ignorance.

It was not surprising that with so silly a mother and aunt, the Frederic Hallam of this story grew up a spoiled, only child. Hitherto they had not spoiled his sweet temper, but they had injured his principles. He was sent early to Eton, and before he was fourteen had made himself so notorious by his scrapes and extravagances, that Mr. Hallam was quietly advised to remove his son, and to place him with a private tutor. Thence he went to Cambridge—where, although not vicious, in the worst sense of the word, he was distinguished for idleness and his love of expensive

pleasures—he could not indulge in anything moderately. Where another man would have been contented with one horse, Frederic Hallam kept two ; his rooms were among the most elegantly furnished in the university ; he appeared to have no just idea of the value of money, or of the length of his father's purse. For some little time, his mother and his aunt supplied the deficiency in his allowance from their own private means ; but this could not last, and he was obliged to refer his creditors to his father.

Mr. Hallam was very angry, and justly so ; he had given his son an income beyond what his actual means warranted. He paid Frederic's bills, telling him at the same time that he should alter his will, leaving him only a small yearly allowance, sufficient to maintain him till he had launched himself in a profession, and settling the remainder of his property partly on his wife, but so tightly that she could not transfer any of it to Frederic until her death, when it would fall to him ; the rest was left in trust till his son should be twenty-eight years of age.

Mr. Hallam's object in making this change was to force his son to give up idle spendthrift habits,

and if he had seen him changed, doubtless he would have again altered his will; but he died so soon and so suddenly, that it remained in force, and about two years afterwards Frederic, who, on quitting Cambridge, had spent a long while on the Continent, found himself compelled to earn his own livelihood, for his mother, though still indulgent, had just begun to find out that her darling was "quite too extravagant," and he had so wounded his aunt Martha by his neglect that her presents came more and more sparingly.

A year before the beginning of this story he had obtained a government clerkship, and his pre-possessing face and manners had already gained him favour in his office, although even here his butterfly, pleasure-seeking spirit had been commented on more than he would have thought possible among "the dons," as he called the heads.

A friend of his, Captain Fortescue, had introduced him to Mr. Goldsmith as a very kind, judicious person, capable of giving good advice in money matters. Hallam, however, found that when he had explained his position and expectations, this gentleman was far more liberal with his

money than his advice, and he had launched out again into greater extravagance than ever; but a few weeks back a "little mem. of account," for which he had been advised by Fortescue to ask, had sobered him, and made him think seriously of his future. Unless he meant quite to destroy his property before it came to him, he must try a fresh course; he knew that it would take time—years, probably—to rise to a good position in his office; increase of salary there was a far off idea, and Frederic Hallam was essentially a present day man, all for speed and hurry, and ready money means and ways.

He thought he would go to Goldsmith and try for once to get advice out of him instead of money.

To his surprise the lawyer gave it willingly, and Frederic's visit to Kirton's Farm has shown us with what result. He was bent now on marrying for money; that was the last new idea; it seemed to offer an escape from his difficulties, and, therefore, one to be made much of; on the happiness or misery it might bring he never bestowed a thought, and if he had, he would have told himself that he was always happy, and, therefore, any one

ought to be happy with him. For several reasons he determined not to mention the matter to his mother. If he married Hester he intended to take her abroad, and polish and educate her before he introduced her to any one. He meant to leave office on his marriage and go abroad without giving any notice of his intentions, and then it would be quite time enough to settle the next move; he was not going to worry himself about it now; on one thing he had resolved during his last interview with Mr. Goldsmith—to be free of that gentleman as soon as possible after his marriage, for he somehow seemed to feel that so long as he had recourse to him so long would his pocket-book remain full of painful little reminders.

CHAPTER IV.

PAY-DAY AT KIRTON'S FARM.

IT was a fine warm Saturday evening at Kirton's Farm. Hester had just come into the hall and put one of the oak settles ready for her father; she then dragged out of the parlour a small three-legged table, and set it in front of the stool; one might have wondered, as this was a regular Saturday performance, why the table was not left in the hall instead of being always carried back to the parlour. If you had asked Hester, she would have said, "It had always been so," or else, perhaps, that she did not choose a good table to be left in that damp desolate hall, never used except on Saturday, when the men came in to receive their wages. She pulled open the door of a curious little cupboard in the wall by the side of the fireplace, and took thence three

wooden bowls, which she placed on the table, and then stood beside it, looking towards the door at which she expected her father to enter.

He did not keep her waiting long. As the Dutch clock in the kitchen struck the appointed hour, his creaking, almost stealthy step was heard coming along the stone passage. He had three canvas bags in his hands, which he placed on the round table, and then seating himself he took from under his arm two large account-books, and an ink-bottle from his pocket, drew a pen from behind his ear, and handed it with one of the books to Hester.

Not a word passed. The girl, standing beside him, still wearing the obnoxious pink gingham, took the pen and book silently, opened it, and was ready to begin.

One of the hall windows was in reality a glass door, generally closely fastened, but now on the latch. In a few moments it opened, and a young lad about sixteen appeared.

He gave a kind of scrape, and then came up to the table.

“How many days, Matthew?”

“Full time, sir.”

The farmer looked up at him sharply.

"It can't be full time—why, your mother died on Tuesday. You don't mean that you went on working all the same."

"Ees, I did. It bean't my fault, sir; I hadn't enough to bury her, and I didn't choose to ax ye to gee a day's wage, sir."

"Of course not," said the farmer; "that would never have done, Matthew, you know. I couldn't have afforded it. Put down six days, Hester, against Matthew White," he said, when he had consulted the book before him.

Hester looked pitifully at the uncouth boy, as, after having received his money (Mr. Kirton had emptied his bags into the bowls), he slowly retreated; but she was not thinking it hard that he had been obliged to work at such a time, she only sympathized with him because he was motherless.

The next who advanced was a red-headed Irishman, who seemed incapable of standing still; he made several bows, and then stood squeezing his hat, balancing first on one leg and then on the other, relieving the monotony of this by vehemently scratching his head.

His time only came to four days and a half.

Mr. Kirton, after looking at his book, asked sternly how it was that he never worked full time, when he had a wife and young children to keep.

The Irishman scratched his head harder than ever.

“ Plase yer honour, that’s jist the raison why I’m not full time.”

“ And how may that be ? ”

Alick was almost the only labourer who would have ventured on a joke with his master.

“ Bekase I stays at home to keep the childer. Why, yer honour, when Ailsie’s at the wash-tub, sure, it’s not one or two of the childer that would fall in the fire, but de whole half dozen. They’d be roasted to crackling be time I left work.”

“ Well, well,” said Mr. Kirton, who did not believe a word of Alick’s excuse, “ four days and a half, Hester, and listen, Alick, I’m going to look at your piece of work to-morrow, and I hope I’ll find it better than the last.”

“ All right, yer honour, and be jacres ye’d

best lose no time, or maybe the wheat 'll be up and growing; sure I'm not the boy to let grass grow under me heels, and that yer honour knows."

"Well, go your way," said Mr. Kirton, as he turned to the next comer, a sallow, sickly-looking man, who walked in very slowly.

"How are you, Peter?" said Hester. The man was a favourite of hers; he suffered much, and bore it without complaint.

"About same as usual, muss," he said, smiling.

"How many days?" said Mr. Kirton, coldly; he always steeled his heart against illness, there seemed a danger of his being called on for charity. He had no objection to let Hester and Biz give away gruel, but he was annoyed that Peter Stasson's pale face should have been commented on before him, and became perfectly blind to it immediately.

"Five days, sir."

Mr. Kirton knew that only severe pain would have made Peter give up a day's work; but he took no notice, and bade Hester put down five days against Peter Stasson.

Hester betrayed no sign of feeling; she waited

till all the men had been paid, and dismissed—till she had replaced the bowls, which Kirton had carefully emptied into his canvas bags, in their hiding place, and the table in the parlour ; and then she joined the farmer in the yard.

“ Father,” she said, in a voice as stern and harsh as his own, “ you’re too hard on that man ; you know Peter ’ll work till he drops down dead ; he must, or his children will starve. You ought to give him a rest.”

“ Hold your tongue, child, and don’t be a fool. How can I give him rest ? do you suppose I can afford to pay him for work he don’t do ? ”

“ Yes, I believe you can.” She spoke without any excitement or feeling, but in a determined tone far beyond her age.

“ Well, then, you believe wrong,” said the farmer, avoiding her steady look. “ Don’t be as foolish, child, as the rest, and go for to think I’m a rich man,”—he lowered his voice, and looked cautiously round ;—“ maybe you’ll find out your mistake when I die.”

He walked away from her to the gate of the pig-yard, where he stood thinking for a few minutes.

Hester remained where he had left her, thinking, too, apparently. She had a strange expression in her eyes sometimes, for one so young ; they were beautiful, dark brown in colour, but looked smaller than they were from their long shape ; they could not be called cunning, and yet they were sharply intelligent, but not restlessly so ; there was a repose in their acuteness which suggested the idea of penetration, rather than cunning.

It is a curious fact, but an almost universal one, that people with small, even moderate-sized eyes, are far more observing with regard to others, more reticent about themselves, than those whose eyes are large and prominent. If the size and form of the eyeball be, according to phrenologists, a sign of the gift of language, it certainly regulates the use of it ; for large-eyed people are almost always great talkers, and we know that those who speak the least are supposed to reflect the most.

She raised her head slightly, as though dismissing an unprofitable subject, and then, as if determined to broach a fresh one, went across the yard to her father.

“ Father, what did that stranger gentleman want here on Wednesday ? ”

The farmer looked keenly at her for several moments without answering.

“ Ah ! you be like all the rest of the women, then, Hester, as full of curiosity as bacon's full of salt ; some of 'em wouldn't ha' bided three days before they asked questions, though. Well, child, he came to see me. You didn't think it was to see you, did you ? ”

“ N—no,” Hester hesitated, and felt almost as if she had told a falsehood ; Biz had been so positive that the young man's visit was to her, that she had begun to believe it.

Her father noticed her manner.

“ I was only making a joke, child ; a London gentleman like that don't come down miles to look at a farmer's daughter, unless he means some harm ; which I take it no one would dare to Ralph Kirton. He came on business, I tell ye.” He spoke very harshly, for her colour had deepened, and, without exactly knowing why, he felt he must be angry with some one.

But Hester was not to be put off so easily.

“ You said last Midsummer day, father, that I

was to begin and help you pay the men, and know about business; now if this gentleman came down on business, why mayn't I know what it is about?"

Mr. Kirton was neither choleric nor impatient; he almost always waited to hear what people had got to say, and thought a little before he answered; he did so now.

"Well, child, I see you're growing a clever woman, and you shall learn business when your head is clear enough to manage it; but ye must walk before ye run. This Mr. Hallam came down here as a clerk from Mr. Goldsmith, my friend in London, to get my signature to some papers."

"Then he is Mr. Goldsmith's clerk;" she fixed her eyes on him with a strangely incredulous look.

Ralph Kirton wished she had not asked the question, but he did not choose to tell her a direct falsehood.

"You heard him say at dinner-time that he was a government clerk."

"And what is that, father?"

"Something of the same kind as the other—but

never mind more of him now; come along and look at the brown calf, she's going away on Monday for good."

A long talk ensued about the feeding of calves, &c., subjects on which Hester could discourse far more fluently than on any others. Mr. Kirton seldom talked much at a time to his daughter, but he knew quite enough about her to feel that Hallam was not a safe topic and that to show openly that he thought so would be the sure way to set her brooding over it. He felt it was natural that she should ask questions about this the first man above a servant, of her own age, she had ever seen under her father's roof, and especially so good-looking a one. How could Goldsmith be so thoughtless to send such a person, when he knew his great anxiety to keep her a child, free from any ideas about dress or nonsense? However, it was done, and the less she was encouraged to think about it the better, and he led her off to talk on her favourite topics, and praised her far more than usual for the success of her last broods of chickens, for in poultry rearing and butter and cheese-making, Hester was, and felt herself, equal to any experienced farmer's wife or daughter.

In all she did she was essentially clever and thorough; she had had but two years' schooling at an obscure watering-place where only farmers' daughters were received, and although she was not allowed to learn anything but English and needlework, her talents showed themselves and were appreciated by her teachers; but her father took her away at fourteen, for fear she should gain a taste for fine clothes and any ideas about love and marriage.

Probably if he had been asked about Hester's future he would not have found a ready answer: he hid her away from others just as he did his money—from pure love of hoarding; doubtless he never questioned himself as to what a lone ignorant woman would do with the great wealth he would leave her; but he despised education, and thought natural talents best left without it; he had not felt the want of it, and why should Hester? He forgot that times had altered since his youth—that in a country intersected with railways it would be impossible to live in the solitude and retirement in which his own early manhood had been passed. He shut his mental sight obstinately to any reasoning which seemed to threaten expense

—to educate Hester and give her fine clothes must cost money, and he determined that she did not want that which he was resolved not to give. He loved his daughter, but it was after a fashion of his own.

CHAPTER V.

LUCY WRENSHAW.

HESTER's uncle and aunt, Mr. and Mrs. Wrenshaw, spite of their dislike to Kirton, had remonstrated with him seriously when he took the girl from school, and had urged that she should be sent to one of a superior class near London, where her cousin Lucy was being educated. Mrs. Kirton, Mr. Wrenshaw, and Frank Wrenshaw, had been brothers and sisters, but Mrs. Kirton and Frank had both died young, when their children were babies, and Lucy was left to the care of a not very wise mother; however, she had this wisdom, that she listened to advice, and, spite of her reluctance to part with her spoiled darling, sent Lucy to school at twelve years old. She was now just eighteen, the same age as Hester, and had left school about six months. She was the only per-

mitted visitor at Kirton's Farm, her home being in the next market town.

At first, when the farmer found her visits were becoming periodical, he looked black, and gave Lucy to understand that her cousin had no time for visits and gossip ; but that damsel had a way of not being put off when she had set her mind on anything, and she carried her point, and appeared at the farm whenever she pleased.

There was only morning service at the little church at Driven, for two small hamlets were served by the same curate, and Hester was sitting listlessly in the parlour—they only used it on Sundays—wondering what could make her feel so dull and do nothing, when her name, shouted in a clear merry voice at the front gate, made her start, and look out of the window.

“ Halloa, Hester ! where on earth are you ? I wanted you to hold the pony, child. Why, he wouldn't stand a minute ; Joe's at his head now.” And Lucy Wrenshaw, flying over the stony path that had destroyed Hallam's boots, very hot and flushed with her exertions, pushed open the parlour door, and came in without any ceremony.

She was as perfect a contrast to Hester as can

be imagined—short and plump, with dark eyes and hair, a little impertinent nose, and a flexible, expressive mouth; she looked as full of feeling and impulse, as her cousin did of calm determination.

And the difference between them was as great as it appeared. Spite of Lucy's superior education and her fashionable style of dress, she really stood in awe of her cousin, although she often indulged in boasting of her own advantages and pitying Hester's lot, and on her return home she would tell her mother "how much good she had done that dear old dowdy of a Hester. What a pity such a pretty girl should be so disfigured!"

For Lucy was generous; she knew and frankly owned that Hester was much better looking than she was. Poor Lucy! how she longed to be tall and beautiful! She was not an admirer of her own style of beauty, for she had beauty, although it depended chiefly on expression, a pair of remarkable eyes, a fresh clear skin.

Hester was not yet aware of the influence she possessed over her cousin; she had not seen much of her, as Lucy had been so long at school, and now Hester was too much dazed with her fine

clothes and conversation to feel her equal, much less her superior.

“Where’s the governor, Hester?”

“In the rick-yard; he won’t be in till tea-time; but won’t you come in the kitchen and speak to Biz?”

“Not I—I’m heaps too tired for that, and besides, Hester,”—she tossed her hat on the nearest chair—“I’ve got something important to tell you.”

“What, a secret?”

Hester’s eyes grew eager, though her manner was calm; curiosity was a strong, or rather weak, point in her nature, as it is so often in those who are unusually exempt from moral weakness.

“Yes; now, what will you give me for it?”

“Nonsense, Lucy, you tell me at once. I’ve nothing to give; what is it?” said her cousin, with assumed indifference.

“What a creature you are, Hester! I believe sometimes you’re a stone; why couldn’t you put your arms round my neck now and give me a kiss? I never knew anything like you; I know when you have a husband you’ll only kiss him once a week.”

“Perhaps not so often,” said her cousin, smiling;

“but now, Lucy, I will know this secret without more talk. I believe it’s only about a new frock.”

“Oh, I daresay,” and Lucy tossed her head with the air of a scornful beauty. “I’ve a great mind not to tell you, Hester, only, perhaps, you’ll burst if I don’t. What do you think of *my* having a lover?”

“What! are you going to be married already, Lucy? I’m sure you’re a great deal too young.”

“Now, Hester, don’t preach; I never saw anything like you, you get the news out of one, and then you don’t look the least bit surprised or glad, but begin and preach; there are plenty of parsons to preach without your having a share. Come now, what do you think? in the first place,” she added, softening down, for her exuberance was really half nervous, “don’t you think it wonderful I should have a lover at all so soon?”

“I hadn’t thought about it,” said Hester; “but I don’t know why it should be wonderful.”

“Well, perhaps not;” Lucy was half sorry she had so nearly betrayed her want of self-confidence; “only it’s very nice—isn’t it?”

“Is it? what is the niceness? does he give you any presents?”

“Yes, he does; but, oh! you mercenary girl, to think of such a thing first of all? But what I think nice is he sits and looks at me, and then opens his mouth and sighs, and shows me bits of poetry in books, about eyes, which shows he must think mine worth looking at, and I thought—” and then Lucy stopped again.

“But, instead of telling me all this, which I should think must be very stupid, can’t you tell me his name, Lucy, and what he’s like?”

“He has rather an ugly name—Jacob Bonham. You’ve heard of him, haven’t you, the young doctor? And do you know, Hester, I always thought I should like to marry an Alphonso; Alphonso Wilfrid Fitzgerald was the name I should have chosen if I could have had a husband christened on purpose.”

“Lucy!” and Hester’s scorn made her cousin laugh, though she winced under it.

“Well, I don’t care, I do like pretty names; at any rate, he is tall, and he has beautiful blue eyes and nice fair hair.”

“What sort of a nose, as you seem to be taking an inventory of him?”

“Oh, I don’t remember about his nose; I think

it is like anybody else's ; his mouth is pretty when it's shut, but somehow his teeth are ugly when he opens it."

" Ah ! " exclaimed Hester, almost warmly ; " Lucy, you could never marry a man with ugly teeth ? I couldn't."

" Dear me, Hester," Lucy bridled up now, " I didn't know you thought of marrying, and who said, pray, I was going to have Jacob Bonham for a husband ? He walks home from church with mother and me, and he may have called a few times to see us, and given me a few trifles, but I suppose a gentleman may pay me attention without my caring very much for him ; but I'm not going to be cross, poor dear, when I come to see you," for Hester had turned away at her first words. " I've told you my news ; I'm such a selfish wretch I always talk about myself first : now tell me yours," and she went up to her cousin, who was standing in the window-seat, and put her arm round her.

Hester did not care for demonstrative affection, she was quite unused to it, but she was too glad to see Lucy to be unkind to her, so she stood quite still and submitted to be kissed.

“ There’s no news ever here, Lucy, you know that well enough ; I’ve nothing to tell except that Peter Stasson’s worse, and I fear he will soon die.”

“ Ah, how very sad ! and then what will his poor wife do without him ? ”

“ I don’t know. I was thinking what will his poor children do without him, and how will his wife manage to feed them ? But come and see the brown calf ; she is going away to-morrow, she was going last Monday.”

“ Very well, only let’s go round by the front way, then ; if we go kitchen way, and Biz begins to talk to me, I know she’ll keep me there half an hour. But, Hester, I don’t think you looked at my new dress ; isn’t it a love of a muslin ? ”

“ Yes, it is very pretty ; but isn’t it a very gay colour, Lucy ? ”

“ My dear, that’s all you know about it. Why, it is the very height of the fashion ; I forget what its name is. I bought it because Jacob said he thought the colour was invented for dark-eyed beauties ; he thinks it sweetly pretty.”

“ You’ve creased it sadly,” said Hester.

“ Oh, that’s nothing ; it is so stiff that it will

stand several ironings before it goes to wash. And how do you like my cloak?"

"I do like that," said her cousin, with a half sigh, "much better than I do your dress; it'll wear well, no doubt."

"Ah, you see, dear, if you knew a little more about the fashions you would find it quite impossible to get along without a something of this colour—either a dress, or a bonnet, or something; but you are saved a good deal of trouble in every way by your quiet life."

Hester turned away impatiently.

"Are uncle and aunt Wrenshaw coming to see you this year?" she asked, as she stooped to unfasten the door of the calf's house.

"Not that I know of. Oh, stop! mamma said something about it yesterday. Why don't you ask them here? Aunt Wrenshaw has been ill all the spring; a little country air would do her good, and she is your godmother too, Hester."

"I was quite a little girl when I saw her last. I wonder if she would know me."

"I can tell you one thing: you must make uncle give you a new frock before she comes—she's so particular about dress; and oh, what a pity

you've no piano, and it is such a treat to hear aunt Wrenshaw play; she and I play duets together."

"Do look at the calf; isn't he a beauty?" said Hester, fondling the creature's head.

"Well, I suppose he is; but you know I'm not a connoisseur in stock. I don't mean to marry a farmer, so there's no use in knowing. But do you really mean, Hester, that nothing has happened since I was here last, except Peter's illness?"

"Yes, I forgot at first, and I remembered it while you were talking—a gentleman came," and Hester's cheeks and forehead became crimson, but she was fastening the door again, and Lucy did not see. She looked very pretty and graceful bending down, her fair skin admirably relieved against the dark, pitched boards. As Lucy looked at her she heaved a deep sigh at the thought of her own rather short, round figure.

"A gentleman!" she exclaimed, "and you never told me all this time. Young or old? come, Hester, I must know all about it."

"Young and handsome," her cousin said, quickly; "but, if you want to hear about him, you

should ask Biz—I believe she is in love with him herself."

The old woman had gradually approached them as they stood looking at the calf.

"Well, Muss Lucy, and so ye've got never a word for I."

"A hundred if you like." There was decided animosity between these two. In her heart, Biz would have liked to see her young mistress as smart as Miss Wrenshaw, but, as it was, she always endeavoured to mortify the latter's vanity as much as possible. "But, Biz, how about this gentleman who's been to see you?"

"Bin to see I, indeed—to see Muss Heaster, you means, muss. Ah, he's a real gentleman and no mistake: you should see his boots, Muss Lucy, and his hat, and the beautiful little thing he had for his whiskers."

"And is he very handsome, Biz?"

"Handsome! that ain't half a word for him. You needn't try to fancy what he's like, muss, because you couldn't, never having seen any one of the sort before."

"How do you know that, Biz? I see heaps of handsome men."

Lucy generally contradicted Biz, although she rarely quarrelled with Hester's opinions, not that she always agreed with her cousin, but she spoke in that firm, almost rude, manner which can scarcely be differed from without involving a dispute, and Lucy had gained at least this advantage from her superior education and position, that she knew sometimes how to economize her opinion—an article in which Hester, like most practical, strong-minded women, was very unthrifty, and, as many of their disagreements arose from their differing modes of life, Lucy felt that to take any advantage from her real superiority would be ungenerous, and so she often held her tongue and let Hester say things she knew to be unfounded for the sake of peace. Kirton's riches were pretty well guessed at, spite of his efforts to conceal the fact, and of course it followed that Hester would be rich some day; but Lucy knew that no money could ever replace the time that had been lost in her cousin's education; but, as I have said, although she would not wound Hester, she did not choose Biz to be wanting in deference to her superiority.

“ Maybe so, muss, but he's the top o' the heap.

See here, Muss Lucy, I'll tell ye a secret." Biz dropped her voice as Hester walked away from them into the kitchen. " You can't think how he's mad in love for muss there." She nodded her head towards the door.

Lucy's heart beat fast ; it would be too absurd for her poor, shut-up cousin to have an admirer more of a gentleman and better looking than Jacob.

" What is he, Biz ? is he, he can't be, an independent gentleman ? "

" All I know, muss, is, his ideers is independent enough ; I heerd un say he wur a member of Government, so I takes it he be one of the Lords and Commons."

" How can you talk such nonsense, Biz ? you must have made some absurd mistake."

" I've made no mistakes, muss. Perhaps you be a-thinking," she continued, with a knowing smile, fixing her sharp black eyes on Miss Wrenshaw, whose discomfiture she perfectly understood and enjoyed—servants understand human nature better than their masters do—" that the gentleman he have made a mistake, in not waiting till *you* comed over ? "

"I wasn't thinking anything of the sort, and you are extremely pert, Biz. You get spoiled by such familiar intercourse with your master and mistress. You had better get tea ready, I think; Miss Kirton said she wanted it."

And talking till the last minute to cover her retreat, Lucy flounced through the kitchen, and joined her cousin.

She knew any complaint of Biz to Hester was worse than useless, and would only provoke a haughty defence of her old favourite, so she contented herself with prosecuting her inquiries about the "gentleman" till Mr. Kirton came in to tea, and as he insisted that her mother would be anxious to see her home early, she took her departure soon after, feeling somehow, as she drove along the dusty high road, as if she did not wish for Jacob Bonham beside her nearly so much as she had done in the morning.

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CHAPTER VL

A WARNING.

“FATHER, I want to speak with you.”

“Well, speak away then,” said Kirton, roughly, as he rose from breakfast, “and don’t be long over it. I’m off to the Croft meadows, and shan’t be home before tea-time.”

“Then I’ll come with you now, and talk as we go along,” and before he could answer she had gone into the long stone passage, taken down her hat and cloak, and stood ready equipped for a walk.

Her father looked at her inquisitively ; she was pale, and her lips were set firmly as if she had made up her mind to carry out some purpose ; but Biz was in the kitchen, and Kirton, who, rather from caution than refinement, never spoke to Hester on private matters before her, walked out

into the yard without giving either permission or denial to his daughter's request.

He led the way through the rick-yard, where he stopped and gave a few orders, then turning out of it to the right strode down a white stony road, full of hardened cartruts, and with a kind of low wall on each side, made of large pieces of stone piled loosely together: the perfect straightness and flatness of the road added to its dull, tedious appearance; even on in front there were no trees to break the straight line of the horizon—so far as eye could reach there were only vast fields separated from one another by these same piled-up stones.

Hester walked along silently; at last either her father's curiosity was too urgent, or his patience proved less enduring than her own.

“Well, my lass, I thought ye were all for talk, and had something more than common to tell to me.”

“And so I have, father,” she burst forth, her colour rising and her eyes brightening, as the excited words came pouring from her lips; “it's a shame, and a heavy shame, that I should be as I am.”

Ralph Kirton stood suddenly still, like one petrified, then, with an action which had become usual with him of late when disturbed by any emotion—but of the significance of which his child was quite unconscious—he pressed his hand quietly on his heart. Hester went on rapidly.

“There is no use in saying you are a poor man, father, and yet you make me live as if you were. Look at my clothes; but there are things I mind more than clothes. I don’t know how to do anything like a lady. I can read, but what have I to read? I can write, but I don’t know how to write a letter. Even the pretty needle-work that other girls can do, I can’t do. I often wish I was dead,” she continued, violently. “I’m little better than an animal.”

She did not burst out crying as most girls would have done, exhausted by the indulgence of her passion. Hester was not nearly exhausted; she stood there facing him, her hands tightly pressed together, feeling that by the sheer strength of her will she could have removed a mountain had it stood in her way.

“Are you mad, child? What d’ye mean?” said

the farmer, angrily. "I've half a mind to shake you into your right senses."

"I'm not mad,"—she went on walking again, and he found himself compelled to follow her,— "and I mean what I say. I'll not cast up what's gone by at you; but I want to be sent to school for two years—to a school fit for me to go to."

The ground seemed to shake under Kirton's feet as he walked along: for some time past he had seen that Hester had become more silent and unsocial than usual; but he had been glad of this, it left him more leisure to pursue his own favourite meditations; but now it struck him that this must be Lucy's work, and he hastened to vent his wrath on her with the relief men usually experience when they can shift blame on any one else.

"It's that conceited little fool of a cousin of yours that's put this nonsense in your head. Why, Hester, I'm ashamed of you; I thought you'd more sense. So you wish to be like her, do you?" he continued, with a sneer. "A lady indeed! a little, vain minx decked out in peacock's feathers—a parrot, who chatters as much nonsense as words! Go along; I'm downright ashamed of my own flesh and blood."

He had annoyed Hester, but he had not stopped her.

“It has nothing to do with Lucy, father; she has never advised me to go to school: but go I must. Father, this is the first time I have ever asked you to do anything for me; you cannot refuse me?”

Angry as Kirton was, his habitual caution made him control himself.

“Well, well, child, you can’t expect me to give a sudden answer to a thing like this, and I don’t think, after the free life you’ve led here, you’d maybe relish the tight hand a governess ‘ud keep on you, and the way those less than yourself ‘ud laugh at such a big girl coming to school!”

Hester had thought about this last objection, and it seemed more formidable now when urged by another voice.

“At least will you do this, father—will you think about it, and will you invite uncle and aunt Wrenshaw to stay here a few days, and take their advice about it? Perhaps aunt could put me in some way of learning by myself; that would not cost much.”

But this was almost as unwelcome a proposal as

the first: visitors at Kirton's Farm, and, above all, people who managed, spite of their small means, to be perfectly independent of him, and to enjoy life withal—the idea made him tremble as much as if he had found some one trying the lock of his study door.

“Impossible, child! What do I want with Robert Wrenshaw? I don't like him to begin with; and he's a spendthrift, who'll come to ruin before he dies, or else leave his wife to starve.”

“She'll never starve as long as I live; she's my godmother.”

“And a precious deal of good that's ever done you. Now, Hester,” he added, sternly, “I've been patient with you—don't you go and drive me into such a passion as 'ull make me say what I'd be sorry for.”

“I'll only say this, father, and then I've done—I don't want you to think me undutiful neither—but you know I do my duty by you in the way of dairy-work and the rest; all I ask you is to do the same by me, and let me have a little change, and be more like other girls. I can't go on as I am. If you'll have the Wrenshaws and hear what they say, I'll not be obstinate about the school;

but you know what I am, father, when I make up my mind : don't drive me foolish."

And without another word she left him, and walked quickly towards home with a feeling of lightness at her heart that she had not been used to lately.

Ralph Kirton was thoroughly perplexed and uncomfortable. He might and he did say, "Plague take the child ! what tantrums be she in now?" But though he was in doubt how to act, he was far too much like Hester in disposition to have any doubt as to what her conduct would be if he gave her a decided refusal : there would be downright open mutiny, and how to quell it at Hester's age he could not determine ; he knew very well she would live on bread and water for a year sooner than give in, and, meantime, the dairy and the poultry would go to ruin. Plan after plan was considered, and, at last, he resolved on writing to Mr. Goldsmith and asking his advice on the subject ; he had named him Hester's sole guardian, and, therefore, he had a right to consult him about her. What puzzled Kirton more than anything was that so silly and inferior a girl, as he deemed Lucy, should have power to influence Hester, for

he still believed it was her silly talk; but he shrugged his shoulders and supposed it was the fine clothes.

“It’s the vanity,” he muttered; “they’re all alike, the best o’ em; I suppose it’s in their skin, and they can’t help it.”

All the time he spent at the Croft Meadow, and during his ride home—for he sent one of the men to fetch his pony—he felt the uncomfortable presentiment of coming evil: in some way or other money was going to be taken from his hoards; it was as if he had been menaced with the loss of a limb, and by the time he reached the farm he could almost have gone on his knees to Hester to beseech her compassion and forbearance; but one glance at her cold and now pale face when he met her in the kitchen, told him appeal was worse than useless; the only way of making terms with her was by maintaining as hard and resolute a demeanour as her own, until he had made up his mind what to do.

She did not open her lips on the subject, but went to bed early, only nodding her usual good-night to her father and Biz even more carelessly than usual; kisses were rare at Kirton’s

Farm, except when Lucy Wrenshaw paid a visit there.

The old servant, always sharp to notice any change of manner, now looked at her master. He was leaning his face on his hand, as if to shade it from the firelight; for the moment supper was over, the candle had been carefully extinguished.

“ Maybe we have and maybe not. Are you taking to be curious in your old age? ”

“ Ha’ you and Muss Heaster been having words to-day, sir? ” she always spoke cautiously and in a subdued voice to Kirton, he had taught her to fear him.

“ No, sir, I hopes not: but, muss, her haven’t spoke a word scarce since her come home, ’cept once, when her asked how long it would take to air that best bedroom, and do it up fit to sleep in.”

The farmer muttered something indistinguishable, then he added, louder—

“ I thought you had more sense, Biz, than to be wasting your wonders over girls’ fancies; you’d better be minding your business, and not keeping up a fire till this time o’ night.”

“ I didn’t think, sir, after living with ye a-going on for thirteen year, I should be grudged a drop of

hot water, which I'm pettiklar in want of to-night, no, that I didn't. Heigho ! time was when I might ha' had my own kittle to bile ; but ere-a-mussy me, it's what's sure to happen to them as slaves and slaves, and thinks for others, stead of thayselves."

"Don't be such an old idiot ; you'd far better leave off grumbling, and go to bed."

"Oh, I'm a-going, sir, but I was a-going to take the fire off fust—there's such a deal on it, to be sure, to make a fuss about."

She was able to sneer comfortably without being seen, as she leaned over the fire and lifted the few red embers out of the grate, and carefully smothered them in the ashes beneath ; and then lighting a bit of tallow candle, which she placed on a save-all, fixed in a battered tin candlestick, from a tall candle which she had just before relit for Mr. Kirton's benefit, she left the kitchen, beginning another "ere-a-mussy" before she was out of hearing.

Kirton waited till the sound of her heavy footsteps on the carpetless stairs had died away ; he then tried the locks of the doors and windows, that of the kitchen and washhouse, and, satisfied

that all was safe, carefully raised the heavy brass candlestick from the table, and, after locking the kitchen-door behind him, proceeded through the parlour to his study.

He took the key from his pocket, unlocked the door, and drew a heavy bolt across as soon as he was inside the little den. It was a dingy, musty place, with only one closely-barred window, high up in the wall, and covered with dusty cobwebs, for Biz and her brooms were never permitted entrance; there was a high office desk, covered with old much-defaced black leather, and an old-fashioned high-backed chair to match; an iron safe in one corner of a most antiquated form, and three large iron boxes with rusty padlocks; there was no litter, no heap of loose papers and letters; jealously closed as it was against the females of the household, the study would have offered nothing to reward their curiosity, had it led them to transgress rules—for the drawers of the desk were all fast.

Kirton raised the candle high above his head, and looked anxiously and suspiciously round, to make sure that everything was as he had left it; he seemed satisfied that all was right, and seating

himself at his desk, he unlocked it, and produced writing materials.

After slowly composing a draught on a crumpled envelope—Ralph Kirton never wasted anything—he sat leaning his head on his hand, while he read it over several times, striking out a sentence here or a word there, which seemed to make his meaning too plain. Kirton's argument was always, “where's the good of them lawyer chaps, if they can't meet your intentions half way.” It was a difficult letter to write: he did not wish his sharp friend Goldsmith to see that he could not manage his own daughter; he only wanted it to appear that he was anxious to give her a few educational advantages at the cheapest possible rate.

The letter took him more than an hour, and when he had finished writing it out fairly, he became aware of a strange, icy sensation in his elbows. I say became aware, because it had been coming on while he wrote, and he had not noticed it; he felt rigid and locked in his chair, while a sudden sharp pain quivered through his heart;—then all was numb and dead, his eyes closed, though he scarcely lost consciousness, but for the greatest temptation that could have been offered

him, a heap of bank-notes even, Ralph Kirton could not have moved a finger. One hand still supported his head, the other held the letter loosely; but they were leaden hands—he could not stir them; he tried to open his lips to call for help, but they were dry and parched, and his tongue was immovable; the weight at his heart increased, he knew that it had ceased to beat, and with this knowledge he lost consciousness.

When he opened his eyes, the candle had burned down far in the socket; his heart was beating in wild tumultuous leaps, that seemed as if they would suffocate him by their violence, and when he rose to his feet, he was obliged to steady himself by his desk—the room appeared swaying about with him.

With the intuitive presence of mind that seems a gift of Providence to those afflicted by such visitations, he remembered having bought some ammonia on the previous market-day, in order that Hester might renovate one of his waistcoats, and this he knew he had placed in his desk; he groped for it with difficulty, for he was still obliged to hold fast by the desk for fear of falling. He found it at last, and the pungent smell

revived him, but he was powerless to leave the study.

“What is it?” he said to himself, the sudden awful reality of death coming before him with a startling vividness, for, although this was the most severe, it was not the first of these mysterious warnings; he passed his hand across his forehead, the fingers were icy and stiff, and yet all his pulses were beating with double life. He tried the ammonia again, and this time it stilled in some measure the suffocating throbs of his heart, but it seemed long to him before he could steady himself sufficiently to reach his bedroom, tottering and staggering like a drunken man, and feeling so utterly exhausted that he could scarcely manage to avoid awakening Hester. He did not want her to know what had happened; she and Biz would be for having a doctor, and that was an expense he was resolved to do without. Next market day he would speak to young Jacob Bonham, the new doctor at Stedding; he had known his father before him, a farmer, a thrifty careful man like himself; Jacob would give him advice without a fee, and so, calculating the cost even of his own life, Mr. Kirton got into bed and fell asleep.

CHAPTER VII.

A YOUNG DOCTOR.

JACOB BONHAM looked grave when he heard of his old friend's attack. He happened to be going home to dinner just as Kirton was leaving the market, so they walked up the High Street together.

“Nothing, you know, of the slightest consequence *now*,” he said, in a semi-mysterious way; “but if these attacks should become frequent, why ——”

“Why, what?” said Kirton, abruptly, finding that the last sentence remained unfinished; “the reason why I speak to you is to know how to keep ‘em off, not because I care to chatter like a woman about my ailments; can you do anything for me—yes, or no?”

“Well, but, Mr. Kirton, that was exactly what

I was coming to: if you'll allow me, I'll—I'll make you up something, and bring it round to the farm myself."

"No, thank you," said the farmer; "I'm not a-going to take up your time, Jacob, when I bean't meaning to pay for it; you have it ready in an hour's time, and I'll call for it."

The young doctor walked off; he was hungry and wanted his dinner, but he made up the medicine first, and then, taking down a volume of Tennyson, read while he ate.

Nature had never intended Jacob for a doctor: he had plenty of talent, plenty of goodness of heart, and the active benevolence almost universally to be found in his profession, but he was neither very polished in manner nor ready in speech; there was little that was really practical about him, and he indulged his dreaminess by reading poetry, and thinking of Lucy Wrenshaw instead of his patients. Perhaps another impediment to his success might have been found in the fact that he was, so long as he remained unmarried, independent of his profession: his father, after bringing him up not to expect a farthing from him, had left him a small competence.

If Jacob had had more energy, he might have still retrieved the past; he might have travelled, have sought the fellowship of highly educated men, have purchased even a London practice which would necessarily have given him the polish he wanted and have roused him from his yea-nay *insouciance*; but he was a man of few desires, he was content to vegetate; for the present his skill seemed to satisfy the good people of Stedding; they had never had a clever doctor before, they did not want new-fangled notions, but were willing to take him as they found him.

It was a particularly healthy time just now—there were a few poor people certainly whom he ought to visit, but to-morrow would do—and he turned again to the “Lotus Eaters,” and made up his mind that he would spend the evening at Mrs. Wrenshaw’s.

It was a pity he parted so abruptly from Mr. Kirton: five minutes afterwards Lucy Wrenshaw came up, dressed in her prettiest hat and cloak, for she knew Jacob was rarely away from town on market-day. Mr. Kirton, however, imagined that she was thus smart on account of the young

farmers who came in to market, and he took fresh umbrage at her vanity.

But few people could withstand Lucy's frank cordiality when she chose to show it.

"Oh! uncle Kirton, I'm so glad I met you —come in and see mamma, and have some dinner."

Kirton was at first shrinking away unsocially, but he knew he was too unpopular among his brethren to have any chance of another invitation, and, after a little pressing, he went in. It was only the second time he had ever entered the house; and Mrs. Wrenshaw, who lived in extreme terror of her sarcastic rude relative, bustled about and scolded the maid for unpunctuality, and put herself and her establishment generally into that happy state of worry which is sure to make everything go wrong.

The dinner came at last, and passed off quietly, but for Mrs. Wrenshaw's perpetual talk to Lucy, though at her brother-in-law. He scarcely spoke to her, but seemed to be studying Lucy with more attention than usual; her mother's perturbation kept her quiet, and he was surprised to be obliged to own to himself that the girl had some

sense after all, and certainly a prettier softer manner than Hester's.

“Uncle,” she said, taking advantage of a pause in her mother's incessant talk, “I wish you'd let me have Hester to spend a day here. If she came over early in the morning, I'd drive her home in good time after dinner—I would, indeed, and it would be a great pleasure to me.”

Lucy was far too clever to imply that there would be any advantage to her cousin in her proposal.

Whether his sudden illness had softened Kirton, or whether he thought a change of any kind might bend Hester's stubborn purpose, it would be hard to say, but to Lucy's great delight and surprise, after remaining silent a few moments, he said, though not graciously,—

“Well, she may come if she will; but mind, Lucy, don't you go taking her to shops, and tempting her to spend money she hasn't got.”

Lucy was so overjoyed, that without a moment's reflection she rushed up and threw her arms round Kirton's neck and kissed him, a proceeding which nearly made him retract his consent; he got up from his seat, feeling, probably, safer in his six

feet two inches of height, and said he must be going home. Lucy blushed and looked awkward, for, though so impetuous, she was a sensitive little damsel, but she said she should drive over the following Saturday, and fetch her cousin, and as he made no opposition, took his consent for granted.

“I’m glad your uncle has gone away, Lucy, I declare I am. I feel quite flustered and out of sorts when he’s here.”

“That’s your own fault then, mamma.” Lucy generally spoke her mind to every one except her cousin Hester. “If you take no notice of him, he’d take none of you, you may depend.”

“Take no notice! goodness gracious me, child! take no notice of a visitor in one’s own house! what can you be thinking of?”

“Well, I don’t mean exactly that, I suppose. I know what I mean, but I can’t put it into words. Look here, our schoolmistress, the head one, Miss Colville, used to say no lady could be elegant who wanted repose—there that is it, mother; I want you to be more elegant, to have more repose.”

“Good gracious, child! what nonsense they do talk at schools! But I can tell you, Lucy, your poor father used to call me elegant when I was

a girl, but who wants to be elegant at forty-five? However, I must say I think they might teach better breeding at schools, than to make a girl tell her mother she's awkward."

Here Mrs. Wrenshaw looked indignant and still more wanting in repose.

This way of taking the matter roused Lucy's wrath also.

"Mother, you know I never meant to be rude, and as to saying you were awkward you know I didn't. I don't care about the thing one way or another, only you seem always to get flustered when people come; I feel so too myself sometimes, but I find if I've the sense to leave myself alone, and not fume myself into fiddle-strings as to what they'll think of me, *everything* seems smoother and more comfortable."

"Ah, well! I suppose you know, Lucy; I don't see the good of having paid sixty pounds a year for your schooling, unless you're to know some things that I don't."

"Now, mother dear, you know I don't mean that; I hate you to say that sort of thing," and she threw her arms round her mother's neck and kissed her; such a kiss—there was scarcely any

outward sound about it, but it hurt Mrs. Wrenshaw's soft round cheek, and left a red flush on it.

"Lucy, Lucy, child ! you've pushed my cap off."

"Oh ! never mind, you must go up and put on a fresh one, there's company coming to supper."

"Company ! oh, I dare say ! that young doctor again, I suppose. Well, I'm sure ; how do you know he's coming, Lucy ? "

Lucy felt very angry, that her mother should take this tone in speaking of Jacob Bonham ; outspoken as she was herself in most things, she had a delicate mind, and she shrank from any joking on the subject ; she had talked lightly of him to Hester, but each time she saw him now she felt more doubtful that he liked her ; she looked confused, but tried to answer quite indifferently.

"I don't know for certain of course, but the two last market days he has been here, so it's natural he should come to-night."

"I wish to goodness, child, you'd opened your mouth this morning," said her mother, rather testily ; "there's nothing in the world for supper, except the ham."

"Why, there was an ocean of meat pie left at dinner, and I bought a cream cheese at market

this morning—such a beauty ; just get a cucumber, mother dear, and there'll be supper for six, in no time."

"Supper for six ! gracious, Lucy, you don't surely expect six, do you ?"

Lucy burst into a hearty laugh.

"Oh ! six and twenty if you like to fancy it, mother dear," and she sat down to her pianoforte, and began to sing "Love's young dream." She had a pretty voice and had been well taught ; although her mother persisted that the untrained wildness of her voice had been much better worth listening to ; as it was there was plenty of wildness in the expression : in everything Lucy resembled a wild plant trained to grow properly in a trim garden ; for a while the cultivation she had received would restrain her exuberance, but when once she became familiarized, the old freedom would burst all restraint and she was as eccentric as ever.

This afternoon she was evidently putting a curb upon herself : she set the drawing-room so perfectly neat that it looked tasteless and prim ; she then went upstairs and smoothed every rebellious hair into the most glossy precision ; she changed her collars and cuffs three times before she could decide

which were the most lady-like ; she said to herself that she had hitherto had her flighty flirty manner with Jacob, and this had, of course, encouraged him, and prevented her from judging him carefully. She had nothing to say against his profession ; a doctor in such as town as Stedding was as much as she could aspire to ; but the idea that her cousin Hester was admired by a real London gentleman gave her an unpleasant feeling of envy and also of discontent, spite of her generous nature.

The evening came at last, and when Mr. Bonham appeared, Lucy remarked, as she might have done before, only she had never thought of it, that he wore shepherd's plaid trousers and a shooting coat : she thought he might have dressed a little better when he knew he was coming to see ladies ; besides, doctors always dress in black : she had not found out yet that Jacob was very shy ; he concealed it under a smiling bland manner, which to so careless an observer as Lucy made him seem at his ease.

He came to Mrs. Wrenshaw's this evening feeling more self-possessed than usual, for Lucy's manner had been very encouraging as they walked home from church the previous Sunday.

Doctor though he was, Jacob managed to go to church on Sunday evenings. He went up to her now with a genuine smile, but her stiff reception sent him back into his shell: he was no longer only shy, he was alarmed, for he thought he must have done something to vex her. He knocked a chair down as he hurried across the room to speak to Mrs. Wrenshaw, and, catching the table cover with his coat, dragged it half off, and Lucy's workbox along with it. He turned full of apologies, but her expression of disgust effectually repelled him from making any proffers of assistance, and roused his pride. He sat down by her mother, and began to talk without taking any further notice of Lucy.

This was the best way of treating her: she began to think she was cross and hard upon Jacob, for after all most men were rather awkward —she sighed as she thought Mr. Hallam was sure to be an exception to this rule. But Lucy was too forgiving, she cared too much about love and kindness herself, to keep for long even a cold seeming with any one. She was just the woman to be trampled on by a cold-hearted man, and with plenty of spirit to feel the wrongs of

others, she was, if possible, too apt to believe herself to blame—that is to say, too apt, for worldly wisdom; in a true man this would probably create deeper love than any witching wiles, or calm self-possessed superiority; but Lucy's lot was not yet decided, and if she chose badly, chances were fearfully against her.

“Lucy, dear, won't you sing?” said Mrs. Wrenshaw; “sing ‘Barbara Allen.’”

Lucy sang; she had scarcely sufficient power for the touching old ballad, but the feeling she threw into it was infectious.

Jacob, who had been making vain attempts at turning the leaves, always taking two at a time, suddenly let them go altogether, buried his face in his pocket-handkerchief, and never thanked her when she rose from the music-stool.

“Don't get up, Lucy; let's have something cheerful now; that does send one into the doldrums, after all,” said her mother.

“Not directly, I can't put comedy on the top of tragedy; can I, Mr. Bonham?—I'll let you down gently,” and she began one of those exquisite German accompaniments which seem to mingle with the voice itself. She sang it with the

English words, however, which rather spoiled the effect; but Mrs. Wrenshaw thought the words the best part of a song, and could not bear to listen to what she did not understand.

Lucy had not much chance of talking to Mr. Bonham; her mother thought it a good opportunity of getting some advice gratis, and asked the young doctor about a crooked joint in her little finger which she said looked ominous; then she wanted to know the truth of a little bit of scandal about the squire's eldest daughter, "who, folks did say, had settled to run away with a spendthrift young officer, and was it true they had been stopped?"

Mr. Bonham really knew nothing about the matter, but his denial did not serve him.

"Ah, you doctors, you're so deep; you get at all the secrets of all the families, and then you only tell 'em to those you like."

"Really, Mrs. Wrenshaw," faltered poor Jacob, "I—I'm not particularly inquisitive."

"Of course you're not," said Lucy, abruptly, "and mamma's joking," and then, before her surprised parent could remonstrate, she said,—"I wish, Mr. Bonham, you would call in on Saturday;

my cousin Hester is coming, and I should like you to meet."

The instant the words were uttered she wished them unsaid; but he answered quickly and readily for a wonder, that he should be delighted to call in on that afternoon, he had to go a long round in the evening.

"Well," said Lucy, with a saucy laugh that brought back all his shyness, "there would be no use in coming in the evening, we should be out."

Poor Jacob had intended his earnest answer to be understood as a sign of love, but Lucy's laugh suddenly blurred the impression which had begun to strengthen in the young doctor's heart: a wife who would laugh at him—and he knew there was a good deal to laugh at in his awkward ways—would be a perpetual blister, and he probably shrank from the idea of trying one of his own remedies.

He said "good-night," far less nervously than usual, for it seemed to him he cared no longer about pleasing Miss Wrenshaw, and with a woman's usual contradiction she was sure she had never liked him so well before.

Lucy was a great talker, at least she liked to

keep her tongue from rusting ; she did not chatter an hour at a time about dress or gossip, or the shape of one person's ear and another's nose, stringing together sentences all expressive of the same meaning, only constructed of different words, till her listeners felt desperate under the monotonous worry : Lucy talked to the purpose even when most excited, and her talk was generally amusing ; but to-night she was so silent after Jacob Bonham's departure, that her mother remarked it.

“ The truth is I feel stupid, mother, and I think we had both much better go to bed.”

Lucy's sleep was disturbed by very unpleasant dreams—Jacob Bonham was persuading Hester to run away with him, and just as, to Lucy's despair, her cousin had consented, a tall gentleman with long whiskers appeared and declared himself to be Hester's brother. She woke up in that half-conscious state, when the dream seems the reality, and began to try and remember about this brother of Hester's, and what he was like, whether he would be kind to her, and whether he would love her. No one would have called Lucy vain or selfish, and yet this craving after affection made her appear to think constantly of herself; deep in her heart lay

the conviction, that no man who knew her intimately could ever love her well enough to make her his wife; and her honest nature told her that she must be so known before she would marry, her husband should know every failing and folly before he became really such. "And so it will be," she went on, as, having at length thoroughly awakened, she thought over the previous evening. "Now that Jacob Bonham begins to understand me, he cares for me no longer, and, to finish it completely, I am going to let him see Hester. Well, it is better before than after; suppose we had been engaged and then he had taken a fancy to her,—that would have been dreadful."

CHAPTER VIII.

MARTHA HALLAM DECLINES LUNCHEON.

MISS MARTHA HALLAM had come to pay her sister-in-law a visit. There was not much love between these two ladies, but they had a due regard to the maintenance of family harmony ; they always spoke of each other as “dear Martha” and “dear Louisa;” but they never could spend half an hour together without using the sisterly privilege of finding fault.

Mrs. Hallam was a fair, blue-eyed, comely dame full of elegant helplessness.

Miss Hallam was rather tall, very dark and slender ; there was restlessness in every feature and in every movement. She walked across a room angularly, and generally contrived in her rapid passage to knock over a chair, or commit some other awkwardness ; not that she ever owned to this : she never saw anything she did not wish

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to believe, and she never believed anything she did not choose. You could not tell Martha Hallam any news; could rarely take her by surprise; had she been told an eclipse was expected, she would have answered she knew all about it; in fact, she gave one the idea that she must have been favoured with private information on every subject.

Mrs. Hallam possessed every personal advantage over Martha; but although the latter was not really clever, she was both quick-witted and quick-tongued. Without being well-born or thoroughly well educated, Mrs. Hallam had that lofty manner and that languid indolence which impose wonderfully on a great many besides the vulgar. In personal habits Martha was probably the truer lady of the two. She lived in her own house—a pretty little villa near Regent's Park—a pattern of precision and neatness, and while Mrs. Hallam's maids wore silk gowns, lace caps, &c., Martha's never displayed a brooch or a bow; the extent of their crinoline even was limited.

Miss Hallam could have kept her carriage if she chose; but she preferred making another use of her money. "What were her legs given

her for if she did not use them, and there were plenty of cabs?" This was a sore trial to the elegant Louisa. She would gladly have ignored the fact of cabs, except as vehicles made for young men; it was provoking of Martha to persist in having one sent for, sometimes when two carriages were standing at the door; it was disagreeable that even her friend's coachmen and footmen should know that she received a visitor who used cabs. Miss Hallam could easily have walked both ways, and sometimes did so, although it was rather a long distance to Wilton Place from Park Village; she was one of those irritating people who are never tired and never ill, and therefore consider such weaknesses affected and unnecessary in others. Martha Hallam would perhaps have called this severe judgment; but until we live in the Palace of Truth, people must be judged by what they seem, and if they persist in a hard unsympathizing manner, why, they must take the consequences.

She must have been tired to-day, though she would not admit it; she had walked through the burning mid-day sun of July, and yet when she was ushered into Mrs. Hallam's luxuriously

furnished drawing-rooms, where the difficulty was to find a seat that was not intended to lounge in, she chose one of those straight stiff-looking chairs, with a small oblong piece of padded velvet in the midst of its quaintly carved back, adapted rather for penance than comfort. It was a very pretty room, not owing half so much of its tasteful arrangement, however, to its owner, as to her son; the chairs and sofas were some of them covered in violet velvet, others in chintz, with gay groups of flowers on a pale green ground: but it is useless and tiresome to make an inventory of the furniture, or of the ornaments which filled the room—they were all rather elegant than showy. One contrast fixed attention as one entered: the charming relief given to the rich folds of the violet velvet curtains by the snowy muslin beneath; and this carried the eye on insensibly to the massive pure white marble mantelpieces, so plain and so broad, the only carving about them consisting in the heavy bosses supporting each shelf.

“ You must be tired, Martha, dear,” said Mrs. Hallam, as she came in; it seemed strange that she should always forget her sister’s ways.

“Not at all tired, thank you; I’m such an excellent walker, you know, and the distance is so trifling—nothing to tire any one. I enjoy sunshine, you know; it never hurts me.”

“So fortunate you have come to-day. You’ll stay luncheon now, won’t you?”

“Luncheon! no, thank you. Why, you know, Louisa, I always dine at half-past one o’clock; how could I eat luncheon?”

“I thought, dear,” said Mrs. Hallam, smiling sweetly, now that her sister had refused, “that you would have perhaps made it your dinner. I expect Frederic will come home then, and I knew you would like to see him.”

“Oh! Fred’s coming, is he? Why didn’t you say so before?” said Martha, testily. One of her rules was never to unsay her own words, and yet she would have given up anything but her own will for the pleasure of her nephew’s company. “Coming away from office, is he? Well, I’ll stay till one o’clock. He’s sure to be here by that time, I suppose; and then if I take a cab, I shall be home in time for dinner.”

Mrs. Hallam shrugged her shoulders and looked ill-used.

“It looks so absurd, Martha, just to go out of the house when we sit down to luncheon; I wish you wouldn’t do it—I am sure Frederic will be annoyed.”

“Oh, no; Fred will be nothing of the kind, Fred and I quite understand one another.”

Mrs. Hallam did not answer, but she writhed; it was so impertinent of Martha to affect to understand Fred better than his mother did.

“How drooping your ferns are,” said Miss Hallam, cheerfully; “you should see mine; they are double the size of those.”

“Ah, I haven’t your wonderful energy, you see,” said her sister, languidly; “I dare say you renew the soil, and all that kind of thing; with my chest I could not undertake such fatigue.”

“Chest! fiddlestick! a little stooping over fresh earth would do you good, Louisa, far more good than reading those silly French novels you are so fond of; not that I do anything to my ferns, but just attend to them; but then my plants always live.”

“Yes,” said Mrs. Hallam, quietly, “I think single women’s flowers and plants always do thrive; I suppose it is because they have nothing else to do but to attend to them;”—here Martha

nearly bounded from her chair ; but Mrs. Hallam's silver flow of speech went on, unheeding the interruption. "There are the Miss Goldsmiths, you know ; really their myrtles are quite surprising."

"Pray, Louisa, don't say I know the Miss Goldsmiths ; I know nothing whatever about them, except that they are all but Dissenters. I hope you will never repent encouraging Frederic to visit people of that kind."

"Mr. Goldsmith visits the Fortescues."

"I don't care who the Fortescues visit. I am quite sure that Goldsmith's a Jew—a nasty yellow old cheat."

"Ah, Martha, how can you—"

"I can always say what I mean, and I always shall, and I wonder that you, with your aristocratic notions, should encourage Fred to visit such low people."

"Low people ! why, they live in a magnificent house ; furnished far better than this is."

"I don't estimate people as auctioneers do," said Miss Hallam, shaking herself angrily in her chair ; "my own notion is that Goldsmith's been a Jew broker, and as for his sisters, I can't endure them."

“ Why, I thought you just now said you didn’t know them.”

“ Ah, no, how should I know them ? the look of them, with their hands full of tracts, is enough for me.”

“ Poor things ! they are very eccentric ; you know, dear, single women sometimes are ; but still I cannot see how the sisters’ religious views can affect Frederic’s intimacy with Mr. Goldsmith.”

“ There are none so blind as those that won’t see, Louisa, and you know, as I so often tell you, you will always look at everything through your own spectacles,—at least you don’t wear them, but you will when you do.”

Mrs. Hallam was greatly relieved to hear the ring announcing her son’s arrival ; she would have preferred having him all to herself, but the *tête-à-tête* was becoming too unbearable even for her placidity.

“ Ah, aunt Martha, how d’ye do ? why, I have not seen you for a long time.”

“ That’s not my fault, Fred ; you know where I live, and how to get there.”

“ Well, I am very sorry, indeed I am,” he said, his handsome face assuming a half look of contrition ; “ I really will come as soon as possible,

but, aunt, you do live in such an out-of-the-way place."

Miss Hallam laughed, she generally laughed when she was annoyed.

"I live so very far beyond Regent's Park, Fred."

"I don't often visit Regent's Park, if you mean that," said her nephew, lolling back in his chair, and pulling out his long silky whiskers ; "it's a long time, I can tell you, since Goldsmith has given me a dinner."

"I'm sure I am very glad to hear it."

"What an unnatural observation ! glad that your promising nephew should have a good dinner the less ! But I say, aunt Martha, what a pretty bonnet you have got ! where did you buy it ? "

Miss Hallam was completely mollified : she had really no taste in dress, but she thought she had, and she adored her nephew's opinion ; praise from him was delicious, and as it was not very frequent, for she had spoiled him out of all deference, she was doubly happy to have chosen this day of all others for her visit ; how she wished she could stay a little longer, but she would punish herself rather than let Louisa have the satisfaction of saying she did not know her own mind. Just as

she was resolving to send for a cab, a letter arrived for her nephew: he walked to the window to read it, then thrust it into his pocket and returned to his aunt, but he now looked so perplexed and worried that she felt convinced the letter was from some importunate tradesman—she had always been very angry with her brother's will and fully persuaded that her sister-in-law might do more for Fred.

“Will you come and drink tea with me to-morrow?” she said, in a low voice; “I want to talk a little business, Fred.”

“I am very sorry I cannot,” he replied, and he really was; those “business” teas at his aunt's were well understood by him—they usually replenished his purse; “but I find I must leave town to-morrow, and shall, perhaps, be away for a day or two.”

“Leave town!” said his mother; “why, Frederic, only this morning at breakfast you said you would take me to see those pictures in Bond Street to-morrow.”

“Ah, I did not know then,” said Hallam.

Both mother and aunt strongly suspected the letter was from Mr. Goldsmith, but neither of

them dared to ask. Frederic never allowed what he called petticoat interference, and was always rather mysterious in his proceedings.

He was evidently anxious no notice should be taken now.

“I tell you what, aunt—I’ll bestow the supreme felicity of my presence on you next Monday; you can wait tea till eight, can’t you?”

“My dear boy, you know your aunt drinks tea at five punctually,” said Mrs. Hallam.

“Fred always chooses his own hours when he comes to me; don’t you, Fred? And now I must say good-by; there’s your luncheon bell; what a cracked sound it has, Louisa! I never heard anything so funny.” And when the servant threw open the door to announce luncheon, she begged him to send for a cab for her, and, spite of all protests, departed in it without eating anything.

CHAPTER IX.

CAPTAIN FORTESCUE.

BUT Frederic Hallam did not leave town very early next day. After he said good-by to his mother, he told his man to pack up a few things for him, bring them on to Captain Fortescue's in Jermyn Street and wait there till he arrived; he then went to his office and obtained leave of absence, and, hailing a cab, told the driver he wanted a good turn along the Edgware Road. As soon as he was clear of London he took out, the letter he had received in Wilton Place and read it over again. Its contents seemed to disturb him strangely: he pulled his luxuriant whiskers to their utmost extent, as if seeking to extract their opinion on the matter, and then, taking off his left-hand glove, twisted round and round the seal ring on his little finger; he then held his hand up

and minutely examined it, and its contemplation appeared to have soothed him.

He presently threw up the little trap and desired to be driven to Jermyn Street.

As soon as he arrived there he sprang out of the cab, and, without waiting for any ushering, ran upstairs and knocked at a door on the first-floor.

“Come in,” said a man’s voice, and Hallam entered.

The room was furnished with taste, but with far less expense than Hallam’s own sitting-room in Wilton Place. There were more books and pictures here, fewer showy ornaments, and a considerable absence of neatness. The owner was lying on a sofa, but he started up as Hallam appeared.

He was tall and elegant, rather older than Frederic, and strikingly different in appearance, for he was pale, and rather melancholy looking, with dark brown eyes and hair, and irregular features; but it was a face which inspired far more interest than Hallam’s, although it might not, perhaps, have commanded such instantaneous admiration; there was a languor, too, about

Captain Fortescue, far more dignified than the rapid movements of his friend; the one was a man of thought, the other essentially a man of action—and yet they suited exactly. Fortescue was not vexed with Hallam's vanity, because he was too really gifted to be vain himself, and Hallam reverenced his friend's superior intellectual qualities, although he considered himself far in advance about dress, knowledge of the world, and such matters, wherein he declared Fortescue to be much too careless. Curiously enough, Fortescue consulted Hallam more than Frederic took counsel of him, probably because people who think are more apt to be troubled about trivial every-day questions than by those of graver importance. Hallam rarely asked his friend's advice except in money matters—he had not wanted it—for his were usually trivial troubles, and he preferred managing them himself; but now he would have given much to be able to consult him, and yet something warned him not to do so.

"You must be wonderfully strong, old fellow," said Fortescue, "to go rushing about in the heat of the sun such a day as this. Here am I dead beat

and fully determined to stay on this sofa till I've finished my book."

" You would not feel the heat half so much if you went into the air instead of mewing yourself up here with a book : why I have been nearly to Kingsbury and back, and I feel quite fresh and cool."

Fortescue got up from the sofa and laughed.

" You look cool, decidedly. Why, you have bloom enough for six Hebes just now. What on earth took you down to Kingsbury ? "

" The air ; nothing but my sanitary ideas on the value of change of air ; there's nothing like air when you've cobwebs in your brain. But, I say, Fortescue,"—he had spoken before as if thinking of something else, and now he looked a little nervous and as if he were doing something he was ashamed of—" look here : if you had a small property—down in the north, we'll say—and you heard that something was going a little wrong with it, what should you do, eh ? "

" Do ? why, go down and look after it. You, of all practical, sharp people, to ask such a question ! Why, what's the matter with you, Fred ? Is the property a lady ? I shall begin to think you are in love."

“ In love ! that’s good. No, I leave that to a sentimental captain who lies on a sofa reading poetry. Love is an article I mean to eschew all my life ; quite unnecessary in marriage, take my word for it.”

“ I cannot agree with you ; at least, I am quite sure I should hate a wife unless I loved her ; but, my dear fellow, we need neither of us anticipate evils. Have you seen our soft-spoken Goldfinch lately ? ”

“ No, but I must see him soon.”

“ I tell you what, Hallam : you know I don’t often volunteer anything, and you are supposed to be sharp enough to take care of number two and number one as well ; but I wouldn’t let things go on long with Goldsmith without squaring if I were you : he’s all right, of course, but he might forget, or he might die suddenly and leave his accounts queer : we do hear of such things : you understand. My advice is, square up.”

“ I wish I could square, by Jove ! I do,” said Hallam, looking wonderfully grave for him. “ Hang it all, Fortescue ! you’ve done away with all the good of my country drive. You are one of Job’s comforters. But, look here : you won’t find

me for three or four days; I'm going out of town. I called partly to tell you this, and partly to ask you to make my excuses to your sister-in-law."

"Ah, I hear you and Helena have been great friends lately; you are a clever fellow with women, Hallam; now I could never take trouble enough to be a favourite with Helena; she wants so much worship; and although she is my brother's wife, and, of course, I feel brotherly affection and courtesy towards her, she's not my sort of woman."

"There's your fastidiousness again. Why, she's about the easiest woman to please I ever saw; you've only got to swear by all her opinions; to yield her implicit obedience, and a good deal of respectful admiration; not difficult the last, for, mind you, Fortescue, she's awfully handsome, sometimes."

"That is just the word for her," interrupted his friend, laughing; "she *is* awfully handsome. But I detest that severe dark-browed beauty; she would make a splendid Judith."

"Well, I'm not a sentimental man; but I like to look at beauty wherever I see it; I'm quite

catholic in that; only I prefer it well dressed," and he shuddered at the remembrance of the "pink gingham gown." "But I must be off; I'll drop you a line to say when I am returned."

"Are you going far?" inquired his friend, looking rather mischievous.

"No: I'll tell you all about it some day, old fellow; it's a pure matter of business, believe me," and they parted with a hearty shake of the hand.

Later in the afternoon, as it grew cooler, and having finished his book, Captain Fortescue sauntered towards Mayfair to deliver his friend's message to Lady Helena Fortescue.

She was exceedingly indignant that Mr. Hallam should venture to send her a message, and, as her brother told Frederic afterwards, looked cruelly and awfully beautiful in her disdain.

"People whom I honour by invitations, Captain Fortescue, should either make or write their own apologies; or rather your friend should have known the state of his engagements better when he accepted mine. I ask him here because, as your friend, I wished to show courtesy to him; but as he does not appreciate the distinction, it is a pity to waste it on him."

Most people feared Helena Fortescue ; especially when her words came out in a dry, sententious, calm manner, utterly at variance with the scornful anger flashing from her beautiful black eyes. Her face was, as her brother-in-law had hinted, Jewish in type : you looked at it more as a picture than a reality, unless her anger was roused : not that she often gave way to unseemly bursts of passion ; she could always curb her temper when she chose, for her will was as strong as any impulse ; but she could not control the expression of her eyes and mouth, and they told demoniac tales sometimes.

Captain Fortescue, quiet, gentle, and indolent as he appeared, had yet to learn what fear was, either of man or woman ; he returned her haughty glance with interest now.

“ Helena, I can’t quite see how *your* notice can confer distinction on *my* friend.”

“ Possibly not ; but then, Percy, you should choose your friends differently. Mr. Hallam, from what I hear, has risen completely from the ranks.”

“ Helena ! he is a gentleman, and quite as well educated as you or I.”

“ Educated ! what has education to do with it ?

The middle class *must* be well educated, they can't exist without it; it don't signify nearly so much to us."

Captain Fortescue looked at her in undisguised amazement; he felt pity, almost contempt, for her; his anger was also roused at her insolence.

"I did not expect this from you, Helena, with all your prejudices; so really well-born a woman as you are ought to show your nobility by repudiating such an unwise notion, which, I am sorry to tell you, is not really high-class in origin; it sounds to me a very would-be-noble one; I am sure it cannot be your own."

She did not deign him the slightest reply—even by a look; and the captain congratulated himself that she was not his wife, and that she had not given his brother any children—they would certainly have been tiger cubs rather than children, he thought, if they had resembled their mother.

He soon took leave, and walked slowly home, wondering if he should ever marry: he scarcely thought so; he had never yet seen a woman he could make a companion of; to live as his brother and Helena did, seeing scarcely anything of each other, would not have suited him at all. He was

happy tempered, and determined to be happy : his idea of marriage was a household full of love and peace ; anything discordant or jarring, either in temper or tastes, would have ruffled the calm of his life, and made him, perhaps, a tyrant ; but sympathy had singular power over him, and gentleness acted like a charm ; the fault he found with women was, that the gentle ones were cold and mindless, while more ardent and high strung natures were often passionate and uncontrolled ; he probably wanted a woman made on purpose for him.

CHAPTER X.

"THE COPSE BIT."

"If you don't mind what you're about, you'll spill us in the ditch."

Mr. Bonham started at the suddenness of the warning.

Hester had kept silence during the first part of the way; Jacob having undertaken to drive the cousins from Stedding to Kirton's Farm early on the evening of Hester's holiday; but as soon as they were clear of the town, he was so continually turning round to see that Lucy, who was sitting behind, was all right, or else to address some observation to her, that their progress was often rather zigzag than straight. "It was worse than that just now," Hester continued; "but if you want to talk, I'll take the reins."

Jacob thought he preferred being laughed at by

Lucy, to Hester's lecture—it was so harsh and so abrupt. She had been much too ill at ease to speak to him during the afternoon: she dreaded being thought a dunce; but anything that roused her contempt conquered her shyness; and she fairly despised a man who drove as badly as Jacob had been doing. Hester had been accustomed to horses all her life, and could ride and drive much better than the young doctor. Lucy was also a fearless "whip;" but she thought Hester very rude and presuming to speak so to Mr. Bonham. She tossed her head: the action was lost on Hester, who sat beside Jacob, her eyes fixed on the pony.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Kirton," he said, nervously; "but I suppose Bob knows the road pretty well by this time, doesn't he? your cousin often goes to see you, I fancy——"

"No, she don't; I wish she did," was the abrupt reply.

"I wish you would tell me, Miss Lucy, when you're likely to be going, and I would always come and drive you home: the evenings are growing darkish for you to be coming home alone."

This was an unusually courageous request

from Jacob: he felt as if Hester were a sort of protection; she did not seem like a person apt to ridicule others.

But Lucy was annoyed rather than pleased, and she scarcely knew why. It might have been that, though she was angry at Hester's interference, it had lowered Jacob in her opinion. Whoever she cared for must also have the good opinion of mankind. Those who have a keen sense of the ridiculous in others are the first to shrink from it when aimed at themselves or those they love; or, and probably this was the stronger motive, she thought that if Mr. Bonham were really in love with her, he ought to know about her comings and goings by instinct, and surprise her by meeting her instead of asking a formal permission.

"Thank you, you're very kind," she answered, stiffly, "but I'm not a bit afraid of going home alone; Bob doesn't require looking after, and we are too well known to fear any annoyance."

Jacob had become so completely captivated with Lucy during the afternoon, that he could not bear this change in her tone, and, forgetting all about the pony and Hester's warning, he turned suddenly

round to see whether her face corresponded with her voice.

They were now in the pleasantest part of the way, for the shortest drive to Kirton's Farm was not straight along the high road; you could cut off a great angle by taking what was called the "Copse bit," a broad grassed road with gates at each end and bordered by stately elms whose branches stretched nearly from side to side. The sun was setting behind them on the right hand, and the shadows of their massive trunks and luxuriant foliage fell across the track, completely concealing the uneven and grass-grown ruts; every here and there was a space where some of the trees had perished, but they had left a record among their brethren, in the grassy hillocks that now served as headstones to their remains, while the brown roots veining the space around, seemed the inscription of their departed glories.

They were close to one of these openings when Jacob's love overcame his prudence.

He turned so completely round as to intercept Hester's view of the side of the road they were nearest to; but she was hardly conscious of it: she had turned her head away, with a bitter sense of

the difference between herself and her cousin; why should Lucy ride and drive wherever she pleased like a lady, and she be always tied at home like a slave: she might ride certainly, but she had no fitting clothes; she could only gallop about her father's fields, and the new longing after refinement growing in her made her shrink from driving the chaise-cart now; all this disturbed her.

As she sat rebelling against her father's parsimony, she saw, curling like a wreath of snow behind the trees, the steam of the London down-train. London, what a wonderful place that must be! Should she ever see it? Even if her aunt, Mrs. Wrenshaw, ever asked her to stay with her there, would her father let her go? She sat quite still, sightless and senseless now to outward things, debating this important question. It was rare for Hester to be thus abstracted; she had taken a leaf out of Lucy's book this evening: so much change and variety during the day had tired and confused her, and she was unconsciously allowing her brain the repose it needed. A sudden and violent jolt roused her, and pitched Mr. Bonham into a deep ditch, which, partially concealed by the swelling of the green hillocks

and the trunks of the trees, extended along the extreme edge of the road, and which Bob had closely approached.

Hester leaned forward and tried to grasp the reins, but she could not reach them; Jacob as he fell had clutched at them convulsively, and by this means had nearly drawn the light carriage on the top of himself. Hester turned to look for Lucy: she was behaving admirably, sitting perfectly still, though looking very frightened, so there was no difficulty about her. It was very hazardous to get out, the ditch being too wide to attempt it on that side, and on the other the carriage slanted up so as to present a formidable obstacle: but Hester had never known fear; gathering her gown closely round her, she just said,—

“Mind, Lucy, the jerk,” and jumped clear down, a few feet off.

She then approached Bob, who had stood as nearly still as the drag on the reins would allow, and held his head while Lucy scrambled over the back of the carriage.

“I’ll hold Bob,” said Lucy, “while you help Mr. Bonham.”

But he had helped himself, although with con-

siderable difficulty, for one wheel was pressing on his shoulder, as he lay at the bottom of what, fortunately for him, was a dry ditch ; his face and one hand were a good deal scratched and cut with the briers and potsherds scattered about, but he assured the girls that he was not at all hurt.

“Here’s a pretty business!” said Lucy. She could not help laughing, now the danger was over and she was assured that Jacob had no bones broken. “This is quite romantic, Mr. Bonham, isn’t it? I don’t see the least what we’re to do ; we can never right the pony carriage without help.”

“I am afraid not,” said Jacob, looking very guilty, and involuntarily rubbing his shoulder ; “it’s rather heavy.”

And then he and Lucy stood still, as if they thought help would come out of the tree-trunks.

Hester had taken her full share in the laughter. “We can’t leave the chaise here all night,” she said, decidedly. “I’ll walk on home and send some of the men ; at any rate, I’ll get Peter.”

“No, no, Hester ; you mustn’t go alone ; I promised uncle to see you home safe, and if I don’t keep my word he’ll never let me have you again : I’ll go with you.”

“ Nonsense, Lucy ! there’s no need ; I can explain to father.”

But Lucy for once was obstinate.

Jacob looked dismayed, he had not counted on losing Lucy.

“ Then how will you get home, Miss Wrenshaw ; it won’t do to leave Bob, I suppose ? ”

“ No, that it won’t, I’m sure,” said Hester ; “ but if Lucy will come with me, I can send Peter back with her, and then you can settle with him what’s best to be done. Come, Lucy, if we are going, let’s start.”

This was a dismal ending to Jacob’s pleasant evening : instead of the delights of a drive home to Stedding, alone with Lucy, to be left to mount guard over a chaise and a pony, and probably this Peter would have to go back to Stedding with them, as he very much doubted the soundness of the vehicle after its tumble, and then he should have no opportunity of speaking to Lucy. He had almost resolved to risk his fate that very evening ; it would be easier in the dusk, he thought, than in broad daylight. How angry he was with himself ! Lucy had laughed as if it were a joke, and had scarcely spoken to or looked at him since the acci-

dent; and no wonder. He felt his face, the blood was trickling down his left cheek, and his hand would be unpresentable for several days to come. He had taken off one of his gloves only a few minutes before the accident—by good fortune the left one. He wondered how long the girls would be walking to Kirton’s Farm. He wished he had a book, but somehow the thoughts of Lucy soon occupied him so fully that he forgot time and all else. It was fortunate that Hester before she started had unharnessed Bob from the carriage, only just looping the reins to the back seat, so that there was no risk of his straying.

Hester walked on for some distance silently beside Lucy, who, now that she had time to think, was almost choked with mortification: what could Hester think of Jacob’s awkwardness? and she had felt so proud of showing him to her, and so pleased because he had dressed himself better than usual, and by this stupid accident he had spoilt all.

She did not know how to break the silence; she longed to find out what Hester thought of Jacob, and yet it would be a bad moment to choose for asking her; she raised her eyes, but Hester’s face

was averted ; she was looking straight on towards the gate at the end of the Copse Bit, now only a little way off, and as Lucy's glance followed her cousin's, she saw that some one was leaning against the gate. Had she been less impulsive, a keener survey would have shown her that, instead of a smock-frocked labourer, it was a well-dressed gentleman.

“ Oh, Hester ! run, there's a man ; he'll help with the carriage.”

“ Hush, Lucy ! don't you see he is a gentleman,” and she turned her face away so as to hide it from her cousin. The next moment the gate was thrown open, and the gentleman advanced towards them.

“ Miss Kirton ! ” he exclaimed, raising his hat, and then holding out his hand, “ I am delighted to meet you again ; I have just been calling at your house, and was coming away quite disappointed to have missed the pleasure of seeing you.”

Hester blushed and trembled ; she literally did not know what to say.

Lucy had slid her hand into her cousin's arm, and she now gave her a pinch ; for she guessed this to be the London gentleman, and was deter-

mined to be introduced; but Hester would never have guessed her meaning, if Hallam had not come to the rescue.

"Your cousin"—his bow and admiring glance were not thrown away upon Lucy—"must allow me to introduce myself."

Lucy bowed.

"I know this young lady is your cousin, Miss Kirton, because Biz told me you were spending the day in Stedding with her; but she said you would be driving home."

"So we were," said Lucy; "only"—and she stopped.

"We've been upset," said Hester; but her manner was so much more shy, so much less harsh than at their first interview, that Hallam felt relieved and thankful. To his great satisfaction also she wore a less objectionable gown.

Mr. Hallam expressed the tenderest solicitude, the most anxious fear, lest Miss Kirton should have sustained any injury.

Lucy admired him very much, and thought him the most perfect gentleman she had ever seen; but she could not help wishing Hester would ask him to lend a hand with the carriage.

"Our carriage is in the ditch," she said at last.

"Ah, I see," said Mr. Hallam; "and you are hastening home to get assistance."

"We only want one man to help," ventured Lucy; and she went on, spite of Hester's warning glance, "there is a gentleman with it now."

"A gentleman!" said Hallam, raising his eyebrows.

"Yes, a—a friend of mine," said Lucy, "who was going to drive me home."

"Then," said Hallam, considerably relieved by this intelligence, "if you young ladies will allow me, I will see you safe to Kirton's Farm; it is getting late for you to be out alone."

He looked at Hester, but she seemed literally tongue-tied. Lucy, however, was resolved to show the Londoner that she could talk for both.

"Ah, you are not used to country ways, I see; we think nothing of being out at this time down here."

The conversation went on briskly enough; Hallam exerting all his powers of fascination and feeling really greatly amused with Lucy's ready wit and flow of spirits. At last, as if deter-

mined to rouse Hester from her silence, he addressed her personally :

“ I often think of you with envy, Miss Kirton ; far away from the dirt and smoke of London, enjoying the fresh cool air, while we are stifling in the noisy dusty streets.”

Hester looked up and seemed to be meditating an answer ; but Lucy struck in before she could conquer her shyness :

“ And do you know, Mr. Hallam, Hester would give up her fresh air and country life willingly, if uncle would only send her to school. I tell her she’d soon tire of that at her age ; don’t you think she would ? ”

The colour deepened on Hester’s cheek into an angry glow ; she hated Lucy just then. She had told her all her trouble that afternoon ; but not that it might be repeated to Mr. Hallam.

Hallam gave a start of surprise.

“ My dear Miss Kirton ! what a strange wish ! you would be miserable at school. I have lived in the world a good deal longer than you ; and I am quite sure grown-up young ladies are happiest and best at home ; besides, what can you want that school can give you ? ”

“ You don’t know,” said Hester, in her old harsh abrupt way; her anger against Lucy had conquered her shyness for the time; “ no one knows but myself. I must go to school.”

“ I wish, dear Miss Kirton, you would trust me, and tell me what makes you so anxious to leave home.”

He bent his head, almost caressingly, towards her, and spoke in so low a tone that Lucy could scarcely hear.

Hester’s proud spirit rebelled for an instant against what she considered a stranger’s interference: but she raised her eyes to his face, and he looked so kind, so brotherly, so earnest to help her, that she yielded to the fascination she had already felt.

“ I—I am so ignorant,” she murmured.

“ You must not think so,” he said, eagerly; “ at your age people often have such fancies, and then the best way is to read; you can learn now much more from books than you will at school; do you know grown up school-girls are my horror ? ”

Hester hung down her head; she felt over-powered that she should so nearly have incurred Mr. Hallam’s horror, and have wished to do what

he considered foolish; for he seemed to her, as he walked beside her, a god of beauty and every manly attribute; she could have knelt to the ground he trod on. Lucy, in her place, would, perhaps, have felt inclined to kiss it; but Hester was never demonstrative.

“Promise me, dear Miss Kirton,” he whispered, “that you will give up this project; it would make me utterly miserable, to think of you transformed into anything I dislike.”

She did not answer him. She could not; her lip quivered, but she steadied it by pressing it firmly against its fellow; she needed to do this, for the tears had started to her eyes.

The sudden emotion startled even herself;—she could not remember when she had been thus touched to the inner recesses of her heart: for an instant there came back her usual proud struggling against the betrayal of feeling; but to her surprise, this melted away and left a soft, yielding, delicious sensation, which seemed to transform her. She looked up into Hallam’s eyes, with such a look as had never been seen in her own before; a look that satisfied him, far more than any words could do, of the wisdom and good effect of his journey.

She looked so grateful, so loving, and, above all, so lovely, that for an instant he forgot her breeding, her harsh manner, and even her red hands ; and walked on silently beside her, looking at her now downcast face.

Lucy began to find herself one too many ; she was dreamy and inattentive ; she saw very plainly that something had changed Hester, and that matters were advancing rapidly between her cousin and the Londoner, and she wished herself back with Jacob—no, not with Jacob ; she turned crossly from his image as it presented itself—but safe in the pony carriage driving homewards.

There was little more said till they turned down the lane leading to Kirton's Farm, and then Lucy asked Hester whereabouts they should find Peter Stasson.

Hester started ; she had forgotten all about him.

“Peter, oh, yes ! I'll go in and send him out to you, or won't you come in till I find him ?”

“Oh, no ! it would only waste time.”

Hester did not venture to ask Mr. Hallam in, but she lingered as they reached the gate, as if she wanted to defer their parting as long as possible.

Lucy stooped down to gather some of the

crimson leaves of herb-Robert which gleamed with an almost blood-red tint as the light of the now fast sinking sun fell on them. She was always kind-hearted, but specially so to lovers: she felt puzzled, and began to think Hester had been very sly, for Mr. Hallam's manner was unmistakable, and she had never seen her cousin so subdued and gentle; so she gathered a variety of leaves before she rejoined them at the gate.

Frederic Hallam fully appreciated her conduct, and thought in his own mind that she was “a little brick.” He did not lose an instant of the time thus gained.

“Miss Kirton, I will not come in with you, as I have had what I wanted—the great happiness of seeing you; perhaps it would be wise not to mention this meeting to Mr. Kirton.”

Hester looked up wonderingly, and with a half-suspicious glance that made her strangely like her father, but the beseeching expression of his beautiful blue eyes softened her. She looked down again, confused and hesitating.

Hallam stood still, keeping his eyes fixed on her, as if knowing that their glance must compel an answer. At last she said,—

"If father asks me, sir, I must tell: I couldn't tell a lie."

The coarse word, harshly uttered—for it was an effort to speak out so boldly—jarred Hallam; perhaps, too, her truthful look might have secretly stirred his conscience to a clearer view of the falsehood he had been acting: he looked first uncomfortable, then reproofing.

"Miss Kirton, I did not think you could suppose me capable of giving you bad advice, but I think it right to mention that your father told me when I was here before, that he disliked strangers, and I thought he might disapprove of your acquaintance with me. I should be sorry to be forbidden the privilege of speaking to you, supposing we should accidentally meet. Then I may believe—" he paused, looking at her till the magic sympathy of his unseen but felt glance made her again raise her eyes to his—"that, unless you are directly questioned, you will not say you have seen me?"

Hester was unwilling to say yes, but the strange power he had over her compelled her to bend her head assentingly.

"But Lucy?" she said, almost as if she hoped

her cousin's knowledge of the interview must prevent the need of concealment.

"Oh, leave me to manage with Miss Lucy; we shall be great friends, I can see: I mean to walk back with her, and see her safe with this gentleman, who is keeping guard over the carriage, and then your Peter can follow at his leisure."

A dark cloud crossed Hester's forehead, and a strange spasm wrung her heart. Why should he care to walk with Lucy; Lucy, who had so many more ways of pleasing than she had; Lucy, who had a lover of her own? It was hard, almost unbearable, and yet all the pride of her nature helped her—she would not let Hallam see her annoyance.

Nor did he. As he spoke, he had turned to look for Lucy, and Hester's brow was smooth before he bade her good-by.

He pressed both her hands, and told her to think of him, for he much needed a faithful friend, and then he drew back from the gate, while she passed in, raising his hat as she did so.

Lucy was running after Hester to say good-by, but Hallam laid his hand gently on her cloak; she

turned sharply ; he had drawn back under the shadow of the great oak-tree near the gate.

“ I beg your pardon, Miss Wrenshaw, but, if you have no objection, I will see you safe back to your carriage,” and he looked as if he were asking a favour instead of conferring one.

Lucy fluttered and blushed with delight, and she began to talk eagerly.

Hallam was amused, for, as has been already said, Lucy’s conversation was not mere ordinary talk ; she was always sprightly, often witty, in her remarks.

But he at length remembered that something had been said about a gentleman left in charge of the carriage, so he only walked a short distance from the “ Copse bit ” gate with her, and then he stopped.

“ I am afraid I must now quit your society, Miss Wrenshaw, charming as it is ; perhaps you would do me the great kindness of not mentioning my name to Mr. Kirton.”

Lucy looked surprised, not suspicious, like Hester, but perfectly astonished.

Hallam quite understood her.

“ The fact is, as I need hardly tell you, that old

gentlemen like your uncle are apt to be just the least in the world touchy. I had no time to go in with your cousin to-night, and Mr. Kirton might feel aggrieved and slighted, and I respect him so highly, I could not bear this to be the case: now do you see my reason? but I need not ask. Nature did not give you that penetrating look for nothing. I see that you are as discreet as you are charming; I hope we may meet again, and before long. Miss Wrenshaw, Duke Street, I think you said was your address. There is your friend in the distance. Good-by."

He shook her hand warmly, and was soon out of sight, leaving her standing looking after him with as strained and anxious a gaze as if he had been her lover instead of Hester's.

How handsome he was, how graceful, and what a charming way he had of bowing; so much dignity! how she wished Jacob Bonham had more dignity; how polite Mr. Hallam had been to her! Whatever could he want her direction for? and if he liked her so much—and it was quite plain he did—perhaps some other gentleman, his brother, or one of his friends might see her and take a fancy to her, as this Mr. Hallam had to

Hester. Visions of a fine London house and a grand marriage flitted through her busy little brain; but the treason to Jacob was short-lived : the next moment she felt ashamed of it, and was softening to him, almost penitent that she had so enjoyed Mr. Hallam's society.

Jacob had seen her part from the stranger, and now hurried to meet her; jealousy, surprise, and curiosity all driving him onwards to inquire who the stranger was, with whom she seemed on such intimate terms.

In his eagerness, he grasped her arm.

Lucy was demonstrative, but she was also thoroughly modest, and this familiarity aroused her indignation ; she shook her arm angrily.

“ Don’t, Mr. Bonham, I don’t like it ; and how could you think of leaving Bob ? Good gracious me, it’s enough to take mother home a broken carriage, without losing Bob into the bargain.”

“ I’m very sorry,” said Jacob ; “ I’ve been longing to see you again to tell you so ; but who — who was that walking with you that just said good-by to you ?” He spoke timidly, far more timidly than he had intended, for her rebuff had disturbed him.

“Oh! nobody you know,” said Lucy, without looking at him.

“I saw he was a stranger, but is he a—a relation of yours?”

“No, only a friend; how very curious you are, Mr. Bonham!”

And Lucy pressed her rosy lips tightly together, as if determined to check further conversation, but Mr. Bonham was not to be silenced.

“What a pity he did not come on and help with the carriage!”

This was too much for Lucy, although the same idea had occurred to her when first they met Mr. Hallam.

“He help with the carriage! why, bless me, Mr. Bonham, he’s a real London gentleman; fancy his white hands tugging and pulling at the carriage.”

Jacob turned scarlet, not from shyness, but from honest anger.

“The true nature of a gentleman, Miss Lucy Wrenshaw, is to help a lady when she is in trouble. Now, I take it, you are in want of help, and, therefore, I should have held your friend a truer gentleman if he had come to your assist-

ance: white hands can do as much work as red ones," and he looked complacently down at his own, which were usually as soft and delicate as a woman's; but he shivered when he saw the injury the left one had received, and, after all, as he sulkily thought, on Lucy's behalf, because if she had not encouraged his conversation, he should never have been upset; and this was the way she rewarded him.

They walked silently up to the carriage. Bob was quite safe and contented, taking a comfortable supper off the grass—for the reins being long he could travel round a large circle.

Not another word was said until Peter Stasson and a boy made their appearance, and then the men only talked together, for Lucy withdrew to a little distance, her heart swelling with indignation at Jacob's impertinence.

With some trouble, they at last succeeded in extricating the carriage, but the wheels were injured, and though they could manage to harness Bob, and let him draw it gently along the road, it was quite unsafe for any one to drive.

Lucy turned round suddenly.

"It is a pity to detain you from your even-

ing round, Mr. Bonham. Peter will see me home."

Jacob murmured some indistinct answer, and advanced to walk beside her, but she quickened her pace, and he was too proud to force his company on her, although he longed to be friends again.

He did not know how to begin, and Lucy kept so near Peter, who was leading Bob, that every word he said must have been overheard, and he had no mind to be laughed at.

Rarely in his life had the young doctor been so out of humour, so thoroughly savage.

CHAPTER XI.

A LOVE LETTER.

MR. JACOB BONHAM was very unhappy, and it was not a quiet misery. He was so recklessly wretched that he kept on walking up and down in his study like a caged beast more than a human being, and when his housekeeper appeared with the supper-tray, he told her abruptly to take it away — he did not want to be disturbed, he wanted nothing, she had better go to bed.

Like many a man who has gone on from boyhood upwards in a calm, indolent, sleepy state of being, with nothing to trouble or vex him, Jacob, during the past fortnight, had been gradually awakening to the two great sensations which distinguish life from mere existence, the intensity of happiness and suffering, with their attendants,

Hope and Fear; and now that his pulses had quickened, that every sentient part of him was more keenly susceptible than it had ever been, stepped forwards on to the pedestal which, perhaps, every man's heart holds, although in some it may ever remain empty, the sombre figure of Jealousy, clad in the prickly garment which stung whichever way she turned.

He thought of Lucy; he could think of little else, and he tried to think coolly. Why should he trouble himself about her? She treated him with less deference than almost any one; shy as he was, and diffident of his own powers of pleasing, he could not help seeing that there were girls in Stedding, as well brought up and far richer than Lucy, who were always pleased to see him, and either of whom would probably say, Yes, if he asked her to become Mrs. Bonham; and yet he turned angrily from the thought of them.

How dared Lucy give him the decided encouragement she had during the first part of the drive, and then refuse to satisfy his questions as to whom she was walking with!

His anger, like a wreathing mist, quite obscured thought and judgment at this recollection; and

he stamped heavily, as he stood still at last on the hearthrug.

But as soon as the mist had cleared away, and Jealousy could see which way to turn without the fear of a false step which might have toppled her from her pedestal, the prickles made themselves felt.

What a fool he had been not to walk up to Lucy and this stranger when he first saw them just as they were shaking hands; he would then have satisfied himself as to who and what he was, and whether he was a fit companion for Miss Wrenshaw. Why, after the way she had looked at him soon after they started on their drive, he had a right to throw any fellow into the ditch who stood squeezing Lucy's hand.

And the mist wrapped him round again so completely, that had Frederic Hallam come in his way, Jacob's feelings would have shaped themselves into something more than words.

But as he slowly recovered self-control, the idea; of the ditch suggested a humbling reminiscence and instinctively he looked up at the mirror over the chimney-piece, and saw his cut forehead. If this fellow really were what Lucy said, a London

gentleman, he would never have believed that a person of such disorderly, almost ruffianly appearance, could belong to, or have any right to interfere with, Miss Wrenshaw; but had he any right? and what an idiot he was making of himself, to rave and rant against Lucy when perhaps she might be secretly displeased with him for his faint-heartedness—for the Dumbiedikes style of his courtship. Books said—and Jacob ruled his actions far more by bookish experience than by the realities of human nature—that a faint heart never won a woman; and he had been very submissive to Lucy; against a harsh, rude manner like Miss Kirton's, he knew he should have rebelled long ago. Lucy was quite different and far more terrible to encounter; she was almost always courteous, but then she so often seemed ready to laugh at him, and sometimes she did laugh.

A cold dew rose on his forehead at the mere notion of declaring his love to her; he felt he could not speak it fairly out: he could only look and hint it; and he must have time for this. How long could it go on? would not she become justly indignant, and perhaps totally estranged? He

must do something to hasten matters. Oh, why was he such a coward in her presence? Why should she not be his own Lucy? His present intercourse with her was often more a misery than a happiness. Ah! if he could think she would ever be brought to love him, even a little; and then her sweet smiles came back, and he dwelt on every syllable she had uttered; it was maddening that he should have risked her good opinion by his carelessness; but he had meditated on that subject long enough during his lonely watch by the carriage.

What was he to do? He must make up his mind. He seated himself at the table, leaning on his elbows, and plunging his hands deep in his hair. Some men evidently think their ideas lie there.

He felt there was now a sort of quarrel between himself and Lucy: she had walked on in dignified silence, and when they reached the end of Duke Street she had made him a formal courtesy, and, bidding Peter call as he returned from the stable where she had told him to take Bob and the broken carriage, she turned away so rapidly that he could not have overtaken her without running, and he

was too angry with her just then for any such overture to reconciliation.

Going calmly over all the events of the evening, he came to the conclusion that she had behaved very ill to him, and it was her place to apologize; but then women were not expected to be as wise as men; and here Jacob held himself erect, and, withdrawing his hands from his hair, put them in his pockets. He really did love Lucy with all his heart and soul, and thought her the sweetest little angel that drew breath. Still he was fond of himself, too; not personally: he thought himself plainer and more awkward than he really was, and was for ever blushing with self-consciousness; but he had a high idea of his own reading and acquirements; also, but this was a profound secret, locked in his own bosom, he was a Poet: he had never ventured to present one of his effusions to Lucy; but she had been the subject and the inspiration of about half a score of really pretty poems—pretty! they had neither body nor soul, only the mere prettiness of complexion and rhythm to commend them to admiration.

Time passed on, still he could not bring himself

to a decision; but the idea of seeing Lucy the wife of another man would continue to haunt him, and was fast driving him desperate.

He pulled out his watch; it was past twelve o'clock: too late, or he really felt valiant enough to go at once to Duke Street, and learn his fate from Lucy herself; he must wait till morning. Morning—at the thought his nervousness returned; in broad daylight he knew he should feel different; and then he was so awkward; he had never talked to any one about such a thing—he wondered how it was managed. At the theatre and in books, he knew the lover sometimes made the offer on his knees. This was a fearful vision. He wondered whether Lucy would expect it; there was something that seemed to him altogether wrong about it. He rose from his chair and shook himself, as if to free his fancy from such an unwelcome picture. How was he to do it? He had, as we see, made some progress, slow as the process seemed. He had started by meditating how he should patch up his quarrel with Lucy, and now he had quite determined to ask her to be his wife, if he could only hit on a feasible method of making the proposal.

Suddenly he started and gave an elephantine bound of delight; perhaps it was fortunate that Lucy was not present: he had found the key to his casket of troubles.

“I will write to her,” he exclaimed; “I know I have a fluent pen, however tongue-tied I may be; and she must answer me in writing, and then if it is as I dare hope, we shall meet as lovers, with all unkindness forgotten; if not, why then I shall leave Stedding for ever, and go out to the wilds of Australia.”

And having announced to himself this doughty resolution, he vowed that he would not go to bed till he had composed such a letter as should soften the heart of Lucy Wrenshaw.

And Jacob was not long about it.

He was no composer of letters—making a rough draft; striking out a word here, putting in another there, and dovetailing each sentence into the other, so as to produce the smooth, passionless epistle some people style a “capital letter.” Jacob was a fidget and fastidious, as men of refined taste are apt to be; and he had refined tastes, although he wore check trousers in the evening, and moved awkwardly in a drawing-

room; but his was not that over-fastidiousness which checks the native movement of the heart and the affections, which would trample feeling and impulse into its own narrow groove, and call everything ill-bred and wrong that does not wear the precise livery of its tenets. Jacob wrote from his heart; every feeling inscribed on the paper came fresh and warm to his pen; there was no pausing to shape it more gracefully; as he experienced it, so it was written down. Long before he had finished, the tears which had been dimming his eyes dropped on the page, and tears that no man need have been ashamed of; they were the outpourings of a heart stirred to its very depths.

His letter ran thus:—

“ DEAREST LUCY,

“ I LOVE you, and I dare to think you know it; but you do not know, you cannot dream, how deep my love is for you. You may scorn and despise it; but that fear shall not keep me from telling you now, how passionately, how fondly I idolize you. To me you are the perfection of all that is good and beautiful in woman. Dearest

Lucy, when I think of your sweet gentle face, hope grows strong within me; and then I am cast down at the thought that perhaps another is preferred before me.

“ Do not leave me in doubt ; if you knew how every hope and thought is centred in you, how wildly every pulse throbs at the thought of calling you my own, you would not lengthen the agony of my suspense. But do not leave me in doubt, Lucy, through any fear of my importunity. Should you find it impossible to love me, tell me this, and you shall never see me again—never again be wounded by my unwelcome intrusion ; only tell me the plain truth.

“ Yours, and yours only,
“ JACOB BONHAM.”

CHAPTER XII.

HESTER'S SECRET.

“I CAN’T but be thinking what’s come to you, Muss Heaster; ye sit moping indoors, and hardly speak a word to nobody; ye’re quiet enough best o’ times, but ere-a-mussy me! I’d as lief have a hearse and two coffins to keep me company as you this morning; why, what is the matter, child?”

Biz turned sharply round from the fire, where she was superintending the boiling of a large piece of bacon, and looked hard at her young mistress.

Hester had passed the night without sleeping, and this had added to the restless fever created by the presence of a new and strange emotion; she had enough on her mind to keep it inwardly engrossed, and blind and deaf to mere outward

things. Not only had the dormant spirit of love, which the first sight of Hallam had germinated in her heart, been evoked to life and action by last night's meeting, but the depressing consciousness of a secret hung upon her. She did not know in what way, but she felt guilty; there had never been open frank confidence between herself and her father, but till now she had never kept a positive secret from him.

Hester had none of her cousin Lucy's elasticity of temperament; she had a different way of meeting trouble and discomfort; she did not shrink from it, she rather met it half way, and then brooded over it; she considered it carefully, turned it over on every side, and if she found it was inevitable sate down to bear it with Spartan fortitude. Lucy would shut her eyes to trouble as long as possible, acting on her favourite axiom that "every cloud has a silver lining!" she would try all expedients to avoid it, but never allow herself to "worry about it," as she said; then when trouble really came, she bore it cheerfully, always maintaining that it was not half so bad as it might have been. But I am anticipating, for Lucy has had few trials as yet. For herself, and those around

her, her plan was surely the happiest. If we dwell on a grievance, we are apt to examine it too accurately, and to take a magnifying glass to it as well.

The old servant's inquisitive look roused Hester now; the new feeling born within her had affected her altogether—she no longer considered herself a child—and Biz's familiarity irritated her. Besides, what right had she to pry into her secret? Hitherto she had not had much opportunity, for on the previous evening Mr. Kirton had been at home, and during the early part of the morning Hester had avoided the kitchen and kept by herself; now she had brought her sewing there; but when Biz spoke to her, the calico had fallen in her lap and the left hand with it, while the right remained poised a brief instant, the needle-point upwards between thumb and finger, and then sank slowly to find its fellow.

Hester started and looked angrily at the old servant, and then went on with her sewing.

“ You make too free, Biz; why don't you leave me alone? ”

“ Hightity—tightity! ” said Biz; “ one may know ye was out for a day's pleasuring yesterday,

Muss Kirton ; ye know folks allus says, ' children's scrow th' day after holiday making.' "

Hester only drew herself up proudly, and did not answer.

" Not to say as I'm surprised, so little pleasure as ye've knowed, poor child, only if ye'd be a little more like yerself, I've got something to tell 'ee as I'd be bound ye'd give yer ears to hear."

Hester coloured ; she could not make up her mind to utter the " I don't care," on her lips ; she knew what Biz had to tell, and felt she must and would hear it ; how burdensome it was to be so tongue-tied !

Biz stood looking at her, smiling and pulling at each side of her own wrinkled cheeks with her doubled fists in an extraordinary manner.

Hester was confounded ; she could not comprehend this pantomime.

But she still held her tongue, only she looked away from Biz and began to sew again.

" Well, some folks be dummell this morning ; I thought, maybe, as ye'd met *him*, and knowed what I meant when ye turned so red just a bit ago ; but it's plain you bean't, or ye'd ha' knowed what I was a-doing of."

“Why don’t you speak plain, instead of making faces like an old owl?” said Hester, breaking bounds at last.

The old woman looked at her with a grim kind of smile: she was used to Hester’s ways; but for the last year or so she had been more even-tempered than in her childish days.

“Well, ye be as scrow as two sticks be, and no mistake, Muss Heaster, and I’m a great mind not to tell ‘ee my bit o’ news.”

Hester made a struggle against her pride. Biz’s face looked fractious, and she could be as obstinate as a weak mule when she chose.

“Oh, news, is it? You should have said at the first you had news to tell, and then, perhaps, I’d have listened.”

“Come, then, make a pleasant face and listen now, and maybe I’ll tell ‘ee; but ye aggravated me, ye did, muss, by looking as if ye didn’t know who I meant just now. Why, there’s only one gentleman as ye know as pulls out his whiskers for all a-world as if he was a-milking cows; they be rare uns to pull, that I grant ye, but I expects he hurts hisself maybe odd times.”

“I suppose you mean Mr. Hallam?”

Hester could have struck her cheeks with anger as she felt the warm blood rushing there.

“Ay, ay, ye'll listen now fast enough, and ye'd best not stay me, for the muster, he'll be in in no time. Well, somewhere about six o'clock last evenin' I just took my walk down to the gate—ye know, child, I allus goes there afore I gets supper—and presently who should I see coming briskly up the lane, looking as fresh as new milk, but our young gentleman. He seemed quite pleased at the sight o' me, and I told him it was unlucky he'd come just then, for the muster'd not been gone out five minutes. I wonder he hadn't met he. ‘But where's yer young missus?’ says he. I toud he ye was a-spending the day in Stedding town with a cousin ye had there of the name o' Wrenshaw, and what d' ye think he says next?”

“I don't know,” said Hester, quietly.

“Why, he seemed in a caddle, and he pulled his whiskers as if he'd pull 'em off, and then he says, ‘Is it a lady or a gentleman, this cousin?’ So I toud he, and then he asked me a lot o' questions about you and Miss Lucy and her mother, and whether they was rich, and I don't know what all

—he be's a rare 'un to talk—so I thought the best way was to send him where he'd be likely to find what he wanted, and I made a good guess ye'd ha' seen he, but I s'pose ye missed. I toud he as I warn't sure which road ye'd be coming—straight along, or through the Copse bit; that's where ye missed, I s'pose: it were a pity, it were, but what ye'd ha' seen he."

Kirton's entrance broke off Biz's talk, and she hastened to set the dinner, and, though Hester longed to hear more, she was almost glad to have some leisure to digest what she had been told.

Unfortunately, or, as it seemed to his daughter, of set purpose, Ralph Kirton was in an unusually chatty humour; the truth was he had just sold two pigs for a much better price than he expected, and he had the money in his breeches pocket. He felt almost genial.

" Well, lass," he said, as he came in, " I've not met ye about farm all day, where hast been? "

" I've been nowhere, father; I'm sewing."

" Ye've had enough to do belike, chewing the cud of all the new-fangled notions ye got in Stedding yesterday. Well, Hester, d'ye like a town life as well as a country one? "

"For some things better, and for others worse," said Hester, abruptly.

"But ye be so grave lately, lass. When I were talking to Lucy Wrenshaw, she smiled in my face and made me smile again. Come, cheer up! I thought, maybe, giving you the outing might raise up your spirits a bit; but ye look as grave as a judge and as dull as ditch water."

"I'm as God made me, father; I don't know as I was ever different."

"Hold your tongue and come to dinner, if ye can't give me better answers." The farmer spoke angrily. "God never made any one who couldn't laugh when they chose."

Hester seated herself in proud silence; a hundred answers burned and quivered on her lips; but she shut her teeth tightly, and denied them passage. If her father called her silent, he might find her so, and make the best of it; she wouldn't speak again till she was spoken to.

In a general way this might have gone on during dinner, and she might have had comfortable leisure for the dream in which she had been living since yesterday—not a dream of the future. Hester had memory stronger than imagination;

she had been going over and over greedily that little walk with Frederic Hallam; before that, she had almost unconsciously worshipped him, but it was the remembrance of a dumb idol, for he had scarcely spoken to or looked at her. All he had said to Biz on his former visit had been duly repeated and treasured; but now, all was changed, the idol had spoken, had shown her that he—— Hester hesitated here. She longed to say loved: but, the idea of love between her and Frederic Hallam was too absurd; and she shrank into herself as from the ridicule attached to such a thought. She might think he liked her; he had himself asked her to recollect him, and had said he wanted a friend; and yet Lucy thought Jacob Bonham loved her, and Mr. Hallam had looked just in the same kind of way; and at the remembrance of those looks, Hester's colour deepened and spread over face and forehead.

“Hester!” shouted her father, in his loud, rough tones. He had been watching her the last five minutes, with a frowning, wondering look. “Hester, what in life ails ye? are ye sick, or scared, or stupid, to sit there staring at the fire, and growing as pale as a turnip, and then as red as a poppy, and

never a word spoken? I won't have it, I say, if ye're not sick. I won't have such behaviour." He brought his hand heavily down on the table.

Biz came quickly from the washhouse; a difference between this taciturn father and daughter was so rare as to excite her wonder, and she knew so well what Kirton's anger would be when fully roused, that she felt it necessary to hasten to Hester's succour.

"Go back to your work, Biz," said the farmer, roughly; "ye're not wanted here."

Biz retreated, grumbling and muttering: she would worry any one's life out as long as she could; but there was no daring about her; what she wanted in courage she usually made up in grumbles against the ill-usage of mankind, and specially of farmer Kirton.

Hester had risen from table, half sulky, half defying her father's anger.

"Are ye sick?" he said, in rather softened tones, for her colour flickered painfully.

Yes, she was sick; but she would not say so. Sick of that disease from which women rarely escape; which, however, is usually more evanescent in a strong, self-willed disposition than in

a more timid and yielding one—usually, but not always. Her secret, too, was stifling her: she was always silent and thoughtful, hardly ever dreamy; and it was this change that had attracted Kirton's attention, for there was no mistaking the altered expression of her eyes.

The likeness between father and child was more marked than ever, as they looked at each other resolutely.

“No, I'm not sick,” she said, at last.

“Then, it's all the worse,” said her father, pushing away the dish from him, for they had just finished dinner when he noticed Hester's blush; “there's something or another going wrong with ye, girl, and I'll get to the bottom of it; ye'd best tell me at once, or I'll find out without ye, maybe.”

“Yes, there is something going wrong,” said Hester, passionately; “I told you so, in the road, a week ago.”

Ralph Kirton looked at her curiously; her passion surprised and quieted him, as emotion always does, in those with whom it is rare.

“Faith, wench, I believe I'd best take ye at your word.”

“ What do you mean, father ? ”

Hester was not silent now ; her blood was rushing about too rapidly to permit the same strong curb she had hitherto maintained over tongue and action. She began to walk hurriedly up and down the kitchen.

“ Are ye still in the same mind about your schooling ? ” he asked.

Hester stopped and looked bewildered.

It was new and strange to her to hide her secret wilfully ; still, as long as silence would serve her, she could endure, but to frame deceit was loathsome, and yet it must be done now.

“ You told me I shouldn’t be happy at school.”

“ So I did ; right enough,” he was rather pleased that his expressed opinion should have influenced her ; “ but if ye bean’t happy here, ye’d be no worse off at school, maybe.”

“ No, I’ll not go to school,” said Hester, sadly.

Shame at herself had conquered her anger ; she felt her father was the ill-used person now.

“ Then if ye stay here, ye must come to your senses,” said Kirton. “ I’ll not have these passions and flights one week, and this sulkiness and

silence another. I thought if I gave ye a day's pleasuring, ye'd maybe be all the better for it; but it seems ye're worse, so you'd best bide at home, seeing it's no value to ye."

Hester's pride fought hard to be listened to; but she had tasted the unspeakable happiness and relief which change brings to a mind oppressed with its own monotony, and, with this added burden to bear, she knew she should need it more than ever.

"Father, I am thankful to you for letting me go to Stedding yesterday; and—and if I went there often, I think I should grow more cheerful like. I'm sure of one thing, if I'd seen as much of aunt Wrenshaw—I don't mean aunt Frank—as Lucy has it would ha' been better for me."

"Girls are no fit judges of what's good for them," said Kirton. "I never said I wanted ye different to what ye are when ye're like yerself; but ye've not been yerself these days past. Let me have no more of it," and he strode out into the yard.

Biz waited till he was out of hearing, and then came into the kitchen full of grievance.

"The muster be put out to-day, that he be; I

s'pose, maybe, he got out o' wrong side o' the bed the morning."

"Hold your tongue, Biz," exclaimed Hester, rousing out of the reverie in which her father's parting words had left her; "what business have you in the matter? Here, give me those crumbs; I want them for the chickens."

And she went out with the few crumbs the careful habits of Kirton's Farm occasioned on the dinner-cloth. Biz stood staring after her.

"Well, them's a pair on 'em this day as ever I set eyes on. They's in as nice a skin as a hedgehog—there be no touching on 'em, they's so sharp. Ere-a-mussy! what some folk's tempers is! they doesn't know thayselves, but they takes precious good care other folks does know. A pretty caddle I shall have with Muss Heaster now. Ah, the gals is all alike when the love fit's on 'em."

It was well the master was not by to witness the way Biz got rid of her feelings on the crockery, finally cooling herself by breaking a plate, at which she grumbled loudly for being so slippery.

CHAPTER XIII.

TWILIGHT MOMENTS.

THERE had evidently been something in the atmosphere of the previous evening detrimental to good temper. When Lucy Wrenshaw reached home, she was so snappish and contradictory, that her mother declared she was "as sour as—as, well—as a crab with its claws out."

This drew forth Lucy's indignant reproof, for she never allowed her mother's continual jumbles to pass uncorrected when alone with her.

"Well, child," said Mrs. Wrenshaw, "I always make that mistake, don't I? But I can't help it, it's all along o' your uncle Kirton. When he was first married, his wife, poor dear, was as frightened of him as ever she could stick, and he used to say she walked like a crab, because

she came into a room with one shoulder higher than the other, sideways like, and my husband used to say sometimes, 'Well, if poor Janet is a crab, I know she's wed to a crab ;' and so you see I got confused between the two."

"Mamma, you've told me that more than one hundred times. Oh, I am so tired, I've had to walk all the way home; I can hardly stand."

"Had to walk? Why, gracious me, Lucy! where's the chaise?" Mrs. Wrenshaw's wide mouth opened to its widest possibility.

"We've had an accident with one of the wheels; but Peter Stasson helped us home, and he says there's not much harm done."

The buzz of exclamations and questions that followed made Lucy feel crosser and more undutiful than ever; she said she really could not go through the whole story till she had had some supper, for that she was perfectly exhausted.

Angry as she felt with Jacob, she could not help sparing him as much as possible in narrating the accident. Her mother thought, however, that he must have been greatly to blame, and said she should tell him as much when she saw him.

Lucy was in such a contradictory mood that this was a fresh offence; but she had the wisdom to be silent, and, making the excuse of extreme fatigue, escaped to her bedroom directly after supper.

She was angry with herself and with everybody. To think of Hester having a lover like that. She thought she was a very pretty girl, and *naïve* in some ways, and she always liked to have her good word; but she had set her down for an old maid; mewed up there at Kirton's Farm, who would ever have the chance of finding her out unless it should be any one she might see in Duke Street? Lucy had had her own little fears about introducing Mr. Bonham to her cousin; but Jacob's manner had soon set them at rest. She saw how Hester's abruptness jarred him, and although she wished him to like her in reason, she felt secretly pleased at his evident indifference to her society. Jacob was rising rapidly in her esteem, till Hester began to find fault with his driving. This acted adversely. Lucy had determined long ago that the man she chose for a husband should be a faultless hero, a paragon in whom no one—not even

her cousin Hester—could find any defects, and for Jacob to subject himself to open interference! The accident completed her annoyance. She had been too proud of him before, not to feel shamed by his disgrace; but still she had clung to the drive home alone, for, after all, his inattention had arisen from his devotion to her.

Her introduction to Mr. Hallam had changed all; he was just the hero she had dreamed of; he seemed to know exactly how to do, and when to say, everything necessary, and he was so handsome, and looked so sweet-tempered, and he was so evidently a gentleman. She blushed as she remembered the anxiety she had felt lest Jacob should advance to meet them, and thus be contrasted with this polished Londoner; and he had looked so earnestly at her as they parted. Of course she was not so silly as to think of him; but if her cousin Hester made such a match, why should not she make as good a one? But this last reflection did not render her any happier; it only served to show her how vain she was growing; and she was growing sleepy, too, and it would be far better not to think any more about it—at any rate, to-night.

Lucy was a much earlier riser than her mother, and she usually had an hour's pianoforte practice before Mrs. Wrenshaw came down to breakfast. The next morning, however, she could not settle to anything ; she arranged some flowers which her cousin had brought her yesterday—a gift from Mrs. Stasson, for there was not such a luxury as a flower garden attached to Kirton's Farm. Hester had no passion for such an amusement, and her father considered that it would take too much of the men's time to keep it in order. These were just common sweet-smelling flowers, such as almost every cottager's garden contains ; but Lucy had a taste of her own in such matters. She had not thrown away the ferns and leaves she had stooped to gather, while Hallam was bidding Hester good-by, and with their help she now arranged a pretty graceful nosegay for the breakfast table.

But still her mother did not come, and she stationed herself at the window. She had not been there five minutes before she turned away with a deep flush on her cheeks. Jacob Bohham had passed on the other side of the street, but without so much as looking across ; in fact, he

seemed to be walking along as carelessly and indifferently as possible. Well, let him; Lucy was quite sure she did not care: only, knowing how very tired she was on the previous evening, she thought he might just have knocked at the door and inquired for her; but how was he to be expected to know manners? Poor Jacob! his hold on Lucy's liking seemed uncertain.

The day wore away slowly and oppressively to Lucy, as days always do when weighed down by our coming fate, for no important event in our lives comes upon us without some forerunner, some presentiment, if we did but watch for its warning.

Lucy's restlessness continued through the day, and she "mooned," as Mrs. Wrenshaw said, "to a degree." Some old gossiping neighbours came in to talk to her mother, and to lament over the accident to the carriage, while Lucy sate quiet, railing in her heart against the misery of living in a country town, where every little trifling action or misfortune becomes at once public property.

How could her mother encourage a pack of old maids who had nothing better to do than to

chatter about other people's business, and make all manner of mischief by their tittle-tattle.

You see, Miss Wrenshaw was out of temper, and quite forgot (for she was a liberal-minded little soul at other times) that different people have, and must have, a perfect right to have different opinions, involving different sources of enjoyment, and that to some the discussion of their neighbours' affairs, the hearing of their friends' misfortunes, and perhaps failings (for we will not suppose for a moment the revelation of vice in others can give pleasure), affords intense gratification, difficult indeed to be understood by those whose more cultivated instincts thirst for more refined enjoyment.

At length, after one or two efforts at conversation, which sounded strangely more like repartee than replies, she quitted the room. As she went into her own "study," as she called it—a nook, or, in fact, a large closet with a window in it—her eyes fell on her hat and cloak, which she had thrown carelessly on the little table the night before, too tired or too dreamy to put them away.

But for the littered appearance these things

gave, the study would have been a pretty little place. It was papered with a pretty light paper, matching that in her bedroom, with which it communicated, not by a door, but by a sliding framework, also covered with paper; this, to Lucy's imagination, at once made her study a romantic retreat; she felt a kind of heroine seated at her little table in a very uncomfortable high-backed chair which she had persuaded her mother to buy at a broker's, because she said it looked baronial; on one side were some small oaken bookshelves, filled with well-chosen volumes. After all, fond though she was of music, books were as yet the great passion of Lucy's life; she read them strangely though, generally dipping in at the end, skimming the cream of the story or subject, but always after she had thus, in her mother's opinion, spoilt the interest, reading it diligently through without missing a word. On the other side of the room, facing the books, hung a few prints, neatly framed, and between the two sides, opposite the window, a basket was suspended, filled with dried grass and bulrushes, and other botanical curiosities. Lucy had plenty of intellectual pursuits, but as yet few useful ones.

Seeing her hat and cloak, she put them on almost mechanically, and having done this it seemed natural to go out. By the time she reached the street door, it appeared to her that she had always intended to take a walk to escape from the Miss Skippers' endless chatter.

One end of Duke Street led into the High Street, the other up towards the open country.

Instinctively she turned to the latter; she wanted quiet to enjoy her dreamy, "moony" mood in peace, not to have its cloud-like visions dispersed by the common-place talk of such chance acquaintance as she was likely to encounter in the High Street of Stedding.

As she went on, the houses gradually lessened in size, then for a short bit they ceased, long garden walls occupying each side of the road; presently began a row of straggling, dirty, but very picturesque cottages, with a low wall of piled-up stones in front, on which, for it was by this time late in the afternoon, lounged some of the owners of the dirty squalid little tenements, others leaning in front, while the children were playing about, or more often seated in twos and threes on the doorsteps.

Lucy passed quickly along ; she wondered why she had chosen "Peg's Alley," as it was called, to walk through alone just at that time of day, for the people who inhabited it were mostly a low drunken set. However, she did not appear to attract much observation.

The houses came to an end, and the road began to ascend steeply ; the banks on each side growing higher and higher, no longer grassy as they had been at first, but supported, as it seemed, by huge blocks of stone on one side, rich in varied colour, as the gleams of sunset reached them through the overhanging bushes at the top of the opposite bank. From among the fissures in the stones the wild clematis sprang in rampant luxuriance, and leaping up to gain the foliage above it, sometimes sate there triumphant in hoary beauty, but as often fell back in clustering festoons, covered with blossoms and feathered seed-pods.

But at length the path, apparently tired of climbing, stopped its ascent, as if to take breath, and went along evenly for about a quarter of a mile, before it descended to its first level. Along this flat road, the banks were no longer high and rocky, but from the hedges grand old oaks and

elm-trees spread their long arms quite across the road, and made a twilight streaked with golden gleams of light.

Lucy was roused from her dreams by the sudden gloom; she thought it was time to return; she wished she had not come that way; there was a shorter path across the fields, but then it was lonesome, and she feared that worse than the rude remarks she might overhear in Peg's Alley.

As she stood hesitating, she saw a figure in the distance coming towards her; her heart beat quickly, for she was far from any houses, and a gang of gipsies had recently passed through Stedding, leaving a thievish, evil name behind them.

She did not like to turn back and walk homewards, lest the gipsy—for it might be one—should come suddenly upon her, so she went on slowly to meet the advancing figure.

A few steps nearer, and her heart beat quicker still, and the warm blood seemed to steal softly and pleasantly through her veins.

In her relief that it was no gipsy, but one who would protect her even from the dreaded insolence of Peg's Alley, she had quite forgotten her

quarrel with Jacob Bonham, and held out her hand cordially with a sweet smile.

He murmured some confused apology, but in so hurried and indistinct a manner, he might as well have left it unsaid, and Lucy was too happy just then to enter into any explanation or discussion. All her hopes and fears, and the worries of this long, tiresome day, seemed at rest—suffused, as it were, by that delicious, indolent, indescribable sensation, which, before a woman has owned to herself that she loves, the presence of the beloved one produces, and which may be felt almost before she is quite aware of his presence, should that be unexpected.

With scarcely a word after the first greeting, they walked along side by side, Lucy with bent-down head and heightened colour, for she felt, without raising her eyes, how earnestly Jacob's were fixed on her. She was not angry with him now, she only longed to ask his forgiveness of her petulance, to show him in some way how she valued his good opinion. She was glad of the twilight gloom of the trees: it wrapped all outward objects but these two in its mysterious atmosphere, and seemed to make them all in all to each

other. She did not think this, she did not think at all, till the path grew lighter in front, and then she sighed, for they must soon emerge from under the shadow of those dear old overhanging trees, and she felt as if she could have walked on there for ever, beside Jacob Bonham.

The sweet spell seemed broken, too, for Jacob ; as the full sunset light streamed in upon them, he slackened his pace, and Lucy felt that at each step he drew nearer—closer to her. His breath was on her cheek ; and yet she had no power, perhaps no will, to move away ; her whole soul, her whole will, seemed suddenly bent to Jacob's, but the shrill railway whistle made itself heard, and they started asunder, as if at approaching footsteps.

Jacob had recovered himself in an instant ; the words that had been quivering on his tongue for some moments past, might still have been said, although they would have been said less passionately. But he had lost his opportunity ; the witching moment was over. Lucy was walking on faster now, her head erect,—just as she would have walked along the High Street of Stedding. She was angry with herself, and ashamed too ; feeling almost as if she had been making love to Jacob.

Her feelings reacted on his; he became stiff and constrained, and began to talk hurriedly, and Lucy answered at random, almost with flippancy, so that by the time they reached Duke Street, they had made each other equally miserable. Lucy longed to ask him to come in, but her pride forbade it; he evidently cared nothing at all for her, or he would have made some excuse to enter, and after her silliness under the oak-trees, what would he think if she gave him any more encouragement?

Her cold good-by completed his disappointment, for his hopes had never been raised so high as in those few delicious twilight minutes, which he now saw had been the creation of his own fancy and vanity; perhaps—and here Jacob started as if some one had shot him—when he had been noting the soft, loving expression of Lucy's eyes and mouth, and her conscious blushes, they had been caused by the remembrance of the stranger, the Londoner from whom he had seen her part yesterday evening.

It is not fair to take advantage of a moment of jealous fury, and record all the epithets which he applied to the contemptible cockney; it was

a relief to have some one to rail against instead of Lucy, but he reached home in a most unamiable frame of mind.

Lucy was even more to be pitied, for she had no one to blame but herself; and self is such an obtrusive, uneasy culprit, you can't quiet him—as fast as you stroke down one of his porcupine's quills, another sticks out and pricks, until you bestow some attention on it. The only possible ways of getting relief are either to maintain sufficient self-complacence to be always right, and so tough-proof against the quills, or else to admit humbly that you are quite wrong, and likely from your exceeding silliness often to be so again; but as this last plan is very unpalatable, and probably impossible to weak female nature. Lucy could not manage it, and came down to join her mother in the drawing-room—as she persisted in calling it, although Mrs. Wrenshaw always forgot and designated it "the parlour"—disposed to be cross to everybody.

Her mother was not there; but Rachel, hearing Miss Lucy's step, came and told her that the mistress had gone out to take a turn with the Miss Skippers, and had left word she should be in soon.

“But here be a letter, miss, as is come for you since the mistress stepped out.”

Lucy took it up listlessly; her usual correspondents were one or two among her school-fellows and her aunt, Mrs. Wrenshaw. Just now she was not in a mood to care for a letter from any one, or to speculate on the address being in an unknown handwriting. Indeed, she scarcely remarked this as she opened the envelope; but then she saw that it was a man’s writing, and, turning to the second page, there was, in a bold legible hand, the signature, “Frederic Hallam.”

Her attention was aroused now; her hands trembled, and her face flushed with excitement; the words seemed to dance on the page.

She read the letter carefully once, and her face was not nearly so radiant as when first she saw “Frederic Hallam” at the end of it.

She read it through again, and now she looked decidedly annoyed, and crushed the letter angrily into her pocket.

It was a courteous, well-expressed letter, full of indirect compliments to Lucy; but it was a request in so many words, with no disguise about it, to be allowed to write to Miss Wrenshaw,

and through her to correspond with her cousin Hester.

Her first impulse was to tell her mother; but she feared she would never keep it to herself, and it was not fair to publish Hester's secret, for Lucy felt pretty sure, from what he had said, that Mr. Hallam's presence on the previous evening would be kept a secret at Kirton's Farm. And besides, what was the use of consulting any one? Her uncle Kirton was hard and miserly, but he was Hester's father, and Lucy had no right to receive letters for her cousin which were to be kept from his knowledge, even if Hester herself approved of anything so deceitful; and Lucy felt sure this would not be the case.

No, she should not take any time to consider it, she should write her refusal at once. It was very painful to write to a stranger without telling her mother; but what could she do? Afterwards she would tell Hester, and warn her that she feared Mr. Hallam was neither open nor to be trusted. "How dare he," thought Lucy to herself, "make a cat's-paw of me, indeed!"

Why should Mr. Hallam be so underhand in his mode of wooing? Lucy liked romance; but

she was sharp enough to know that Hester might be running into danger if she corresponded with a man in a higher station than her own without her father's knowledge. Though she was so strong-minded, she did not know the world and its ways as well as she did ; and Lucy could not help feeling a little pride that she could be useful in advising her cousin in a matter of this kind.

CHAPTER XIV.

FREDERIC HALLAM DRINKS TEA WITH
HIS AUNT.

“I’m very sorry to be late, aunt,” Frederic Hallam pulled at one of his whiskers diligently while he spoke, “but I had a particular engagement this afternoon.”

“Yes,” said his aunt, decidedly, but not crossly; she could rarely be cross to Fred; “you had a particular engagement to be here at half-past five o’clock, and now,” looking at her handsome gold watch, “it’s nearly seven.”

“By Jove, seven! how my watch must have lost!” he drew it forth to compare it with his aunt’s, but seeing it wanted only six minutes to the hour, he pocketed it again without comment.

“I’m really sorry to have kept you waiting

so long for your tea, why not have had it without me?"

"What? when you said you'd dine early on purpose; that would have been polite, would it not? How's your mamma?"

"She's not very well to-day; so much languor and debility about her, she says."

"Fiddle!" said his aunt; then, seeing him look annoyed, "what I mean, Fred, is, that your mother would do well enough, if she'd only not think about her health; just look at me; I'm always well, just because I have no time to think about myself. Such nonsense and fancies!"

Hallam smiled; he did not want to vex his aunt this evening, and he knew this was an old grievance. She had excellent health, and consequently uniformly good spirits herself; and she would not believe in her sister-in-law's ailments, and what Martha Hallam did not choose to believe in, as a matter of course, had no real existence at all.

But as Fred let the subject drop, she had no excuse for continuing it, and began to pour out tea in a flutter of hospitality that was pleasant to witness.

The little drawing-room, although somewhat too

prim in its arrangements, and smart in its colouring for good taste, was the perfection of neatness and brightness—the pretty old china and silver tea equipage making the centre of the picture.

Even for her beloved nephew, except on high days and holidays, she would not derange the comfort and order of her establishment by a late dinner-hour. So when she asked him, as she did on this occasion, to tea, she bade him dine early, and then he should have something to eat more solid than bread and butter. She had a bird-like appetite herself, and although the little dish of eggs and the tiny cold tongue looked tempting and nice, perhaps it was fortunate that Hallam had not dined at one o'clock, or he might have astonished his aunt's repast by, like the little bear in the story book, "eating it all up."

Miss Hallam tried in an indirect manner to discover the secret of his country journey; but it was not easy to find out anything that Frederic Hallam did not choose to tell; his perfect good temper and matchless assurance giving him double advantage in an encounter of wits. But at last, finding her unusually persevering, he abruptly changed the conversation.

"By-the-by, aunt Martha, I do wish you would call on those poor Miss Goldsmiths."

Miss Hallam looked aghast; she could not be angry with Fred, but her indignation at such an outrageous proposal must explode somewhere.

"No, Fred, no," she said, in her shortest, dryest voice; "you know I'm not fond of new acquaintances."

"Now, aunt Martha, that's what you just are, and it's because you are so kind to and fond of a new acquaintance, that I ask you to call on my friends; why, you'll do them all the good in the world."

Fred was too discreet to add, what was commonly reported among his aunt's friends, that she had always some pet family or person on hand to whom she devoted herself incessantly until they gave her cause of offence, and then she turned to some one else for a while, perhaps a year or so, at the end of which time some former cast-off pets would be taken into favour again. To a certain extent she was right in saying she did not seek new acquaintance; she was so continually estranging old ones, that she was always having to begin over again.

“Very likely I might,” she said, now in reply to her nephew; “but I don’t want to.”

“Not want to do good! what an extraordinary assertion, when you know you are the most benevolent creature going.”

He was obliged to look away, as he offered this large sugar-plum; for the conceited wriggle with which his aunt had said the last words amused him as much as it would have annoyed a less good-tempered person.

“I’ve plenty of friends, Fred, and I don’t see the use of running after strangers. The Miss Goldsmiths are very good sort of people, no doubt; but, as I said before, I have plenty of friends of my own.”

“Well, but now look here; it’s just because you have so many friends of your own, that you should take pity on these two poor ladies who have so few, and who are really anxious to know you.”

“Ladies!” Martha Hallam tossed her head and wriggled again in a most irritating manner. She had the annoying habit peculiar to some women of never being perfectly still; she must surely have fidgeted or twitched even in her sleep. “I can’t call such a pair of old-fashioned-looking

goodies, ladies ; " then seeing Hallam look grave, " I beg your pardon, Fred ; I forgot they were your friends."

" Ah ! I see where the shoe pinches," he said ; " you think they are snobs ; and do you know, aunt Martha, I always till now thought you superior to women's little-mindedness on these matters ? "

Miss Hallam settled her flounces and looked red and flurried, the reproof and the compliments were so mingled ; she was in secret awe of her nephew, and set the greatest value on his good opinion, but it did not seem the thing for him to lecture her on conduct.

" No, Frederic, I am not aware that I am in any way prejudiced or narrow-minded—quite the contrary ; but I was born and bred a High Churchwoman, on true conservative principles about everything, and I never have associated with any one professing any different principles ; "—she stiffened her back-bone to its straightest perpendicular—" I'm not going to begin now."

" Oh, aunt, aunt ! and just because these good women—for they are good women—go to a different church, you'll have nothing to say to them."

"Not if I know it," said Miss Hallam, decidedly.

Fred leaned back in his chair and whistled softly; he was as much vexed with his aunt as he had ever been in his life; but he had two points to carry this evening. You probably understand him well enough by this time to be perfectly aware that he did not sacrifice a whole evening solely and wholly to please his aunt; no, he had "other fish to fry," and, therefore, he forbore to urge her, knowing by past experience that her amount of contradiction was unfathomable.

Some of her words, however, although he had often heard her utter such sentiments before, had roused a new train of thought, and he sate playing with his watch-chain, and lounging in the most comfortable chair in the room, while his aunt, after sending away the tea-things, spread out a huge piece of worsted work, at which she had been employed the last five or six years.

Her nephew sate thinking about Hester, and his recent interview with her. She had looked prettier than ever; but, alas! her manner of speaking and awkward bearing still offended his ear and eye. He wished she were more like her cousin—there would be little trouble,

he thought, in polishing that ready-witted, frank-spoken girl into anything he wanted ; she had no *gaucherie* about her, the very movement of her elbows was different to Hester's ; but the correspondence would effect much. He should tell Hester everything he wished her to learn or to do ; he did not care about a clever or accomplished wife, but he would take good care not to marry one who might bring him into ridicule. There was plenty of good material to work upon, he felt sure ; he had time enough before him—time enough, no !—and then the remembrance of dunning creditors and pressing claims made him feel as if he could not wait patiently for Ralph Kirton's death. He never thought there would be any opposition from Hester.

Something whispered him to keep off the subject with his aunt, and yet, like a moth round the flame, he hovered near it, so near that at last, in the midst of a desultory talk about common-places, he said abruptly,—

“ I wonder if that piece of worsted work will be finished by the time I marry.”

“ Marry ! ” She dropped the shade of wool she had just selected from her basket. “ You

don't mean to say, Fred, you are thinking of marrying?"

"No, I don't say that I am, but if I did I suppose there would be no harm done, would there?"

She looked still more surprised.

"Harm! of course not; nobody said there would be any harm; but you are very young, Fred, to be encumbering yourself with a wife and family, unless—the lady has money or first-rate family."

"There you go," said Hallam, laughing. "I never saw anything like you women; you build such castles on a slight observation. Don't you frighten yourself, aunt—if ever I do marry, it will be for money; if I do make such a sacrifice of myself, it shall be for something worth having."

But she shook her head.

"No, Fred, there you would be quite wrong; no mercenary marriage ever prospers; there's no blessing on it to begin with; but I know you are only joking, my dear boy," for she saw he had turned away impatiently; "you're getting into some little difficulties, or you would not talk of marrying only for money."

"I'm not getting into them, because I'm never out of them—how can I be with my income? But now, joking apart, instead of this perpetual worry and borrowing and troubling my friends, if I could find some quiet, plain-faced, sensible girl, with lots of tin, don't you think I might do worse?"

His manner puzzled her; she would not believe him in earnest, although it sounded strangely like it, but Miss Hallam rarely took the trouble to reflect; she considered herself too sharp to require it.

"Do worse? I should think so; of all people, Frederic, you must not marry an ugly wife, or one you don't love. You know I can't endure ugly people: I have never been used to them."

"But you must be reasonable, aunt: you cannot possibly expect me, having no money of my own, to find everything in a wife. Suppose now, just for argument's sake, I pick up some pretty country girl with a fortune large enough to cover her want of breeding, what would you say to that?"

"No fortune can cover want of breeding," exclaimed Martha Hallam, getting excited; "but I know you are only joking, Fred, or I don't know what would become of me: the idea of you married to anybody beneath you! I don't want

to make you vain—you are a Hallam, and therefore you have a right to good looks—but I can't see why your wife should not be well-born and rich as well as pretty. But now, my dear boy, tell me about these difficulties."

And then the real business of the evening began, and before Frederic Hallam bade his aunt good night his heart was considerably lightened; she had supplied him with the means of paying the most pressing of his creditors, who, during the last few days, had been behaving so badly that they had made him contemplate the expediency of a temporary residence abroad, unless matters could be precipitated with Hester Kirton. It was unlucky that he had failed about the Miss Goldsmiths; he knew a little notice from his aunt would have pleased them greatly; however, he would try again.

CHAPTER XV.

THE SECRET PRESSES.

“THE mother of mischief is no bigger than a midge’s wing,” says the proverb; and thus it came to pass that this first little deceit had so warped Hester’s perceptions, that she could not agree with the view Lucy took of the clandestine correspondence. It might be that the total want of open dealing between herself and her father had rendered her independent of his control in matters of opinion. Any way, she was displeased with her cousin for what she had done, and she showed it.

Poor Lucy felt very sorry. Ready as she was in speech, she was usually undecided in judgment when it had to be acted on; she always consulted others, either her mother or

her aunt, about her undertakings and pursuits, and although in her impulsive way she had said to herself at first that she should write and refuse Hallam's request, still when it came to be done, she felt dismayed and uncertain, not about the right or wrong of the matter, but at the awful responsibility of doing anything so decided, unknown to any one else.

Besides, it was the first secret she had kept from her mother; and she loved her dearly, spite of her occasional pertness to her. This weighed on her spirits, and she felt heavy hearted too on account of Jacob Bonham; and now she had ridden Bob over a few days after the receipt of the letter, to show it to Hester, and to tell her how she had replied to him, and her cousin's hardness made her feel as if she had been guilty of evil dealing towards her.

“At any rate, you might have asked me first what I wished done,” said Hester.

“I did not think of that,” said Lucy. In her heart she felt that her cousin's opinion could not have changed her mode of action in a matter of simple right and wrong; but then this did not shape itself directly, and even if it had, she would

have been afraid of provoking a rude answer. Yet when she reached home again, she felt she had acted like a coward. What was the use of being Hester's friend if she dared not tell her the truth? How she longed to be as out-spoken as Hester herself, only she wished she would not be so hard.

Hard! Hester felt like a tempest after Lucy had left her. She had insisted on keeping the letter, and Lucy set no value on it, and so gave it to her. What a nice letter it was, thought the poor girl, as she read it and re-read it; and she might, perhaps, have received such a letter once a week—maybe oftener—if Lucy had not been so silly and disobliging. Hester could not understand her reason. Lucy, who was always talking about love-stories and nonsense—she should have thought it just the very thing she would have entered into. She sate half the afternoon musing over it. Biz was in the dairy superintending the churning, too busy to offer much disturbance to her young mistress's train of thought. Suddenly a light flashed on her dark perplexity. Her keen observation had noted Lucy's annoyance at Mr. Bonham's carelessness,

and she had also remarked her eagerness to speak to Mr. Hallam. It was plain now; Lucy was jealous that Hester should have so grand and handsome an admirer, and would not lend a hand in the matter. For an instant Hester's strong will roused itself, and she felt almost determined to set aside Lucy's opposition, and answer the letter herself; but no, she could not do that—the modesty of her nature recoiled at the thought; it would be owning that she cared for Hallam before he had openly professed affection for her; and a warning voice whispered that the friendship he had spoken of might not mean any warmer feeling. But then why want to write to her? He must care for her. So she sate still, facing the fire, spite of the warm evening; her elbows planted on her knees, and her slender hands forming a resting-place for the soft chin. Hallam's letter to Lucy lay in her lap, disregarded for the present, as she mused over her cousin's evident jealousy.

After all, perhaps, Lucy's refusal was a thing to be rejoiced at. She wrote nice interesting letters, Hester knew, very different to her own stiff, laboured compositions, which made her ears burn

and her fingers ache before they were concluded to her satisfaction ; while Lucy could sit down and write a note off in a few minutes, and laugh and talk while she was doing it. Suppose Mr. Hallam had found her the most amusing correspondent of the two, and had transferred his friendship—Hester did not like to call it anything else—to her cousin ?

A slight noise behind her made her start, and squeeze the letter up in her hand ; she looked round hastily ; no one was in sight, but she heard a sound of clearance in the dairy which made her sure Biz would soon be making preparations for tea. So she smoothed the letter carefully with her hand, folded it up, and was just slipping it into her pocket, when her father entered the kitchen, so noiselessly and suddenly that she almost dropped the letter with the start she gave.

He cast a keen, suspicious look at her.

“ What be you cramming into your pocket, lass, that way ? ”

“ Only a letter I had from Lucy, father,” and Hester blushed at her unaccustomed deceit ; her pride revolted from such a meanness.

Kirton had a great mind to ask for the letter, but just then Biz came in, scolding and grumbling, "There was not half so much butter as there might ha' been. She couldn't think how 'twas. When she was a gal, she worked with a will, but it seemed, it did, as if gals' arms now-a-days was too tender for handling churns. They'll be a getten a machine next, I reckon. I should like to know whatever 'll come on all the live men and women when the whole world's moved by machines."

"You're talking nonsense, Biz," said Hester, who always stopped the grumbling when she could. "Machines can't go by themselves; they want a many hands to guide them."

"Ugh! I can't abear new-fangled ways, not I. What the gals is made of now-a-days is past my belief,—made o' petticoats mostly, I lay. There bean't a mossel of strength in their arms. Dress, dress, dress, that's all their cry; if it served 'em for summut to eat, I'd think less about it, maybe. But there's that Faith Stasson, she eats her head off whenever she comes nigh the place to do a cast o' dairy work. She's made a clean dish o' that cold bacon, and no mis-

take, and me counting on it for to-morrow's dinner."

Mr. Kirton had left the kitchen while tea was getting ready, but he caught her last words as he now came back.

"The bacon ate up! That was more your fault than hers, Biz," he said, sternly. "I'll have you do your own churning, if ye can't manage a strip of a girl like that. She couldn't have ate it, neither; maybe she took it home to her mother."

Hester rose at his last words. She considered the Stassons her special property, and she would not hear them unjustly accused.

"Father, how can you say such a thing? Why, Faith's as honest as I am myself."

"Maybe she is," said Kirton. It was strange that, hard and stern as he was, he exacted slight respect or deference from his child—perhaps from the consciousness of how little fatherly tenderness he had shown her; so true is it, that coldness and indifference never engender reverence. "But," he continued, "I wouldn't be fain to answer for your honesty, Hester, if ye had a sickly mother and hungry brothers at home."

Formerly Hester would have tossed her head at this reproof, now the dishonest weight of her secret kept her humble.

Her father looked hard at her, but said nothing. He stood silently before the fire, and then he called out, "Biz! there's that room betwixt mine and Hester's, that hasn't been slept in lately; can you redd it up without much firing and waste?"

"What, the best room!" exclaimed Biz. "Ere-a-mussy, it 'ood take a week's airing, that it 'ood, afore a body 'ood sleep in it safe."

"Safe!" Kirton sneered. "Look you here, Biz! Hester has set her heart on having Mrs. Wrenshaw here, and I'm in a mind not to balk her for a day or so's visit; but, look you, I'll have no firing and thriftless ways. Carry a pan o' coals through the room and pass it thro' the bed, and welcome, only not too much o' that; they'll cost enough when they do come. They're asked for Monday."

He turned abruptly and went out of the kitchen, leaving his hearers thunderstruck.

Visitors at Kirton's Farm! Why, such an event had never been dreamed of since Hester's

birth, except when Mrs. Wrenshaw had volunteered a two days' visit on the occasion of her niece's going to school, to see, as she said, that the poor child was not sent there in rags.

Their wonder would have been lessened if they had known that it had occurred to Farmer Kirton that Mr. and Mrs. Wrenshaw were not growing younger, and had no children, and would have a little property to leave; and he began to think after his talk with Hester, that, as Mrs. Wrenshaw was her godmother, it would be more natural for her to inherit this property than her cousin Lucy.

The day Kirton had dined in Stedding, Mrs. Frank Wrenshaw had mentioned her intention of asking her brother-in-law and his wife to pay them a visit before winter set in. He disliked Lucy's mother without understanding her; probably our dislikes would be much fewer if we took more trouble to understand each other's springs of action and words—and he had made up his mind that she was a grasping woman, eager to secure all she could for her own and Lucy's advantage. "Ill-doers" ever are, and ever were, "ill-deemers."

He had pondered the matter deeply. The idea of asking them to Kirton's Farm presented itself, but was quickly rejected as impossible: he shivered as he thought of the extra tea and sugar, and bread and meat, that must be consumed; it would be wanton, lawless expenditure in which he had no right to indulge. Still he was haunted by the unpleasant thought that Mrs. Frank, through her manœuvring, might secure for Lucy a snug little income which would otherwise have been Hester's.

In the midst of his perplexity he received Mr. Goldsmith's reply to the letter he had written about Hester's wish for schooling.

His friend strongly deprecated such a plan, and proposed that her father should try to make her home happier for her by a little cheerful society there; "staid sensible people, however," wrote Goldsmith, "not a pack of boys and girls to fill her head with nonsense."

This was agonizing: he was brought to the brink, but he had still no courage to take the plunge. The items of the Wrenshaws' daily consumption swelled and grew, till his sleep was haunted by visions of gigantic loaves and quarters of mutton—for he knew he dared not feed them

entirely on bacon—rushing tumultuously from the kitchen, away and out of sight and recovery, followed by the flocking cocks and hens, most of which seemed to have had their necks wrung.

Next morning's post brought a letter from Mrs. Wrenshaw. She told Mr. Kirton that she and her husband hoped soon to be at Stedding for a few days, and that, as they should not have time to see much of Hester, they hoped he would spare her to them when they returned home.

He had no occasion to ponder over this letter; he took it into his little study, and seated himself to answer it. "A likely matter he'd trust Hester away, and in London, too, where were lots o' smart chaps as would be taking a fancy to her; there would be the saving of her keep, that was something; but he should lose her help in the farm and house, and then she'd want a rare rig o' gowns and such like; no, the only safety for Hester was to let her bide at home out o' the way o' the men."

And, having written a decided but carefully worded refusal to Mrs. Wrenshaw's invitation, he made a fresh calculation of the household expenses of entertaining her and her husband there for

a couple of days and nights, and, with much inward repugnance, decided that, if next morning he thought well of it, they should be asked in the face of all risk to Kirton's Farm, for it seemed to his calculating brain that, if he gave them offence now by wilfully alienating them from Hester, he should be playing Mrs. Frank Wrenshaw's own game for her with a vengeance.

The bread-and-mutton visions apparently did not disturb his night's rest, and we have seen the determination he had arrived at, to the utter bewilderment of Biz and even to the great surprise of calm, collected Hester.

“Ere-a-mussy me! the world must be a spinning round too fast, I'm thinking, and addlin' some folk's brains.” Biz had occasionally a shrill, spiteful way of laughing at her master behind his back, her revenge for the abject submission she usually maintained towards him. “To think o' the muster askin' visitors! you'll excuse me, Muss Heaster,” and, laughing still, she sate down and wiped her face with her apron, as if quite overcome by the intensity of the joke.

“I don't see anything absurd. I'm pleased aunt Wrenshaw's coming; ain't you pleased, Biz?”

This was asked rather defiantly, as if she thought the old woman ought to be pleased at what so rejoiced her, and Biz's contradiction was immediately roused.

“Pleased! yes, no doubt but what ye are pleased, ye as has got nothin’ to do but sit and make things pleasant to yer friends when they comes; ye never thinks o’ the extra plates and cups to wash and the rest o’ it; but some folks don’t care how much thay put upon an old woman, not thay.”

“You’re talking nonsense, Biz!” said Hester, decidedly. “You know very well I shall help wash up, and I shall do all the extra bed-room work myself.”

“And it’s like enough I shall let ‘ee!” said the old woman, crossly. “A nice thing for Mrs. Wrenshaw to go to Stedding and see Miss Lucy a-sittin’ up at her music, a-playin’ and a-singin’, and then come here and find ‘ee a-doin’ house-maid’s work, with yer frock, maybe, pinned up in front o’ ‘ee! No, Muss Heaster, ye must behave like a born lady while yer aunt’s here, if ye means her to ask ‘ee back.”

Hester coloured crimson; everything in this speech jarred upon her pride and her jealousy of

Lucy, for, although she did not know it, she was very jealous of her; but she was too proud to answer, and stood as if she had not heard, while Biz went on grumbling.

“Pan o’ coals, indeed! I’d like to see the pan o’ coals as ‘ood warm a room as hasn’t been slep in six year and more. It ought to be fresh white-washed, it ought; but I’m thinkin’ the muster ‘ood go right crazy if he was to see I making a work about it, and he’d be sure to smell it out. There’s some oud hangings in the press, if the moth’s not eaten ‘em right out, might serve; but there should be a fire in the chimney, if ye don’t want yer aunt to get her death there; she’ll catch her bones full o’ rheumatics as it be.”

“Then there must be a good fire,” said Hester, decidedly; “I shall tell father so: best not ask aunt at all, than do her a mischief when she comes.”

Her heart swelled as she thought how differently Lucy would be allowed to welcome her visitors.

“Then ye’ll take it on yer own shoulders bout the fire,” said Biz, who, to do her justice, was hospitable at the bottom of her heart, although the enforced habit of pinching and screwing for so

many years had given her miserly habits, which came more naturally on first thoughts than her real nature. "A good fire there ought to be, and that's for certain."

But she hushed as her master's stealthy step again approached the kitchen, and bustled forward with the tea—not before she needed, for Ralph Kirton indulged in a sort of homily on waste of time and words, as he stood with his back to the fire; which she knew very well was meant for her, although she did not choose to appropriate it.

"Blame being," as she remarked to herself, when she was safe in the washhouse, "the ony thing the muster's freehanded wi', and that he do fling about broadcast like the grain, he do. It's a lucky job for I, tain't in natur like the grain; it don't grow, that's one comfort; and he's mostly so silent that maybe, if he didn't scold a bit here and there, his tongue 'ood rust for want o' waggin'. 'Soft words butter no parsnips;' and for sure hard uns break no bones."

CHAPTER XVI.

AN EVENING AT MRS. FRANK WRENSHAW'S.

By the following Monday Hester and Biz had contrived to make the best room somewhat habitable ; but Mr. and Mrs. Wrenshaw's visit was deferred for a day.

They had arrived at Stedding on the previous Friday, and it was settled by Mrs. Frank that she would spare them for a couple of days at Kirton's Farm, on condition that Hester came over with her father to tea on this Monday evening, and drove the Wrenshaws back with them in the pony-carriage, which had been mended in anticipation of the visitors.

Ralph Kirton growled and refused to go ; but he said Hester could do as she pleased.

Mr. Wrenshaw was a handsome old man ; spite of care and sorrow, and he had known both, his

face only spoke of brightness and benevolence. His wife looked more careworn, but there was a sweet resigned look mingled with the calm sensible expression, more interesting than the mere common-place prettiness of her sister-in-law, Mrs. Frank. They were childless now, but they had not always been so.

They both warmly welcomed Hester, although they said they should not have known her; and her uncle paid her some courteous old-fashioned compliments on her improved looks.

Hester said her father would expect them early, so they must not stay supper; and, after a due amount of lamentation on this head from Mrs. Frank, she made a compromise and gave them what she called "a solid tea," which many people would have pronounced a dinner.

To Lucy's dismay, her mother announced, just as they were sitting down to table, that she had met Mr. Bonham in the morning, and, as she thought it would be quite stupid for Mr. Wrenshaw to sit down among so many ladies, she had asked the young doctor in to make even numbers.

No words had passed between Lucy and her mother on the subject of Mr. Bonham; they had

both been so busy preparing for their visitors, that nothing but their arrival had been talked about. But, perhaps, Mrs. Frank had guessed that there was something wrong, as Jacob had never appeared in Duke Street since the accident to the pony-carriage, or, seeing his dull looks when she met him for the first time that morning, she might have fancied that the dread of her displeasure was keeping him away. Mrs. Frank was so apt to take up extravagant and romantic notions, and to attribute entirely wrong motives to people, that it might be dangerous to say exactly what she thought about Bonham on this particular morning. What she did was another matter, as she spoke so loud as to be audible to many of the inhabitants of Stedding, when she asked the young doctor to join what she called a very select tea-party.

“ My London relatives,” said Mrs. Frank, with an air—for, although she was not proud, she liked it to be known that she *had* London relatives; independent gentlefolks too—ever since Mr. Wrenshaw had given up business and lived on his little property.

Mr. Jacob Bonham bowed, and said he should

be most happy, and he looked as if he should while he spoke; and then, as soon as he had gone on his way, he reproached himself for his weak folly, when he had resolved to see as little of Lucy as possible, for he had sorrowfully made up his mind she was engaged to that London puppy, spite of her soft looks in those twilight moments under the oak-trees.

Well, he must go now; he had promised and he never broke his word: but it should be the last time; he would speak to and look at her as little as possible, and with visitors present there would be no risk of being left together; that he could not endure, he knew.

His heart throbbed painfully when he found himself on the threshold where he had last parted from Lucy. Why was he going to inflict this torture on himself, to see the sweet face which could never be his, perhaps to receive again the sweet soft smiles he had so fatally misinterpreted? He could only hope she might be in one of her saucy moods, and yet then she looked to his fancy prettier than ever.

She had been rather quiet and dull after her mother's announcement; but directly the young

doctor appeared she flushed up into an excited gaiety, which struck her quiet observant aunt as being forced and unnatural. Her uncle aided her, however, and they went on joking and laughing, till poor Jacob was thoroughly convinced, if he had any doubt before, that Lucy did not care two straws about him.

It was very bitter, but he would try to keep the promise he had made to himself; Lucy need not fear he would persecute her with his attentions.

He also became excited and talked a good deal to Mrs. Wrenshaw, and as Hester was sitting beside her aunt she was soon included in the conversation. She did not feel so shy of him now. That unlucky tumble had done much to dissipate the reverence she had previously felt for the doctor of Stedding, and Hester had a peculiarity common to both weak and strong minded women: if she once felt herself in any way a man's superior, she entertained a slight contempt for him ever after; and superiority, either real or fancied—one answers as well as the other—always gives a certain amount of self-possession.

She had a feeling of pity for him, too, on this evening; she had not forgiven Lucy. Hester had

never had much to forgive hitherto; so perhaps she was not practised in the virtue; it seemed to her as if it were not possible she could forget her cousin's mismanagement, and when people are intolerant, they are apt to think it is because they have good memories.

And now, besides ill-using her, Lucy was behaving with strange caprice to Mr. Bonham. What she had herself told her, and the foolish way in which she had encouraged his inattention to the pony, and many other things she had noted during their drive, had assured her that her cousin cared for the young doctor; but this evening she did not seem to be even kind to him; she had frowned when Mrs. Frank said she expected him to tea. Hester thought she, too, well knew why; and she began to tremble, as a new fear suddenly dawned. Suppose Lucy were corresponding with Mr. Hallam on her own account, telling her own version of her cousin's silence. But, although suspicious, partly perhaps by nature, but mostly from evil example, she was too just to give such a thought room to grow in; and, as she looked up at Lucy's open, frank face, it was impossible not to reject it. Still, she was behaving unkindly

to Mr. Bonham, and therefore Hester made unusual efforts to be civil to him.

One reason for this might have been that she was extremely anxious aunt Wrenshaw should not think her shy and awkward; she was her godmother, and therefore far more her property than Lucy's, and, although Hester was not vain, she was proud, and shrank from being despised.

"I hope you weren't much hurt the other night, Mr. Bonham?" she said, presently to the young doctor.

He looked up quickly, thinking what a harsh, unpleasant voice she had.

"Not at all, thank you," and then he became red and dignified, and stuffed his hands into his pockets, and Hester felt in a moment that she had made a mistake.

Lucy turned round sharply. What could Hester find to say to Jacob? She began to think she should speak to him herself, and then she saw his ungraceful attitude. She turned away with almost a groan. No, it was impossible; she could not really care for a man who was so uncouth in some ways as Jacob. The coloured trousers were bad enough, when he was asked to

meet Londoners, too ; why, uncle Wrenshaw had put on his dress suit,—but to cram his hands in the pockets and stand there looking red and foolish —she could have shaken him for doing himself so little justice.

“ You must come and see us when you visit London, sir,” said Mr. Wrenshaw.

“ I shall be most happy to do so: I have been thinking lately of leaving Stedding, and trying to get a London practice.”

“ Bless me ! ” exclaimed Mrs. Frank, with open eyes and mouth, “ you don't mean it, Mr. Bonham ; I thought you were getting on so nicely. Why, what would Stedding do without you ? it would be like a cart without a horse ; like my carriage without my pony.” She was fond of talking of her carriage, few of her neighbours could boast such an appendage. “ Bless me ! I'm always making mistakes ; I'm sure I'm quite sorry ; I meant nothing about the accident ; I assure you, I spoke quite as it came.”

Jacob flourished his pocket-handkerchief, and thereby partly hid his nervousness ; but this second allusion to the hateful accident was trying.

He was surprised to be again addressed by Hester, to whom London seemed a sort of paradise now.

“When are you going, and where shall you live?”

She spoke as if she had known him for years, with no womanish effort at pleasing, without even a smile upon her lips, and he replied in the same tone, more as if he were speaking to a man.

“I have not made up my mind on either subject—circumstances will govern me.”

He could not help stealing a look at Lucy; but she had turned away, and was apparently seeking for some music. Either the exertion of stooping or some other cause had flushed her throat deeply. Jacob felt a sudden gleam of hope; but when he went up to the piano to see if he could be of any use, she refused his assistance so ungraciously, without so much as turning round her head, that he shrank away confounded at his own forgetful folly. Ah, Jacob! was it likely Lucy would let you see the tears which your sudden news had sent brimming to her eyes?

The evening was going flatly, as was natural when three out of the six persons present mis-understood each other; for poor Lucy had not been at all able to discover what had caused Hester's stiff manner towards her; too light-hearted herself to bear malice, she did not dream of it in her cousin.

The restraint seemed to Mrs. Frank a tacit reproach to her powers as entertainer. She always liked people to be at full pitch of merriment, or she fancied they were dull.

"Don't you think we're too quiet?" she whispered to Mrs. Wrenshaw. "Suppose we try a round game," she added, aloud; "we can pull down the blinds, you know, if you don't like to be seen playing cards by daylight. I don't care, the Miss Skippers make a regular practice of it as soon as they've finished tea—they're not so old neither—but Jemima Skipper says they can't see to work by candle-light. What do you all say?" She looked at her guests.

"By all means," said the old gentleman, always ready to contribute to the general amusement, although both he and his wife would greatly have preferred listening to Lucy's songs.

“ Oh, you like cards ; that’s all right. Lucy dear—now where are they? Bless me”—she paused, rubbing her chin, her usual way of jogging memory—“ oh, I know, Lucy, they’re in the popery jar ; I put ‘em there myself to make them smell sweet. By-the-by,” she went on, as the fragrance spread over the room while Lucy was taking out the cards, “ I wonder whether it’s called popery because the smell’s any way like incense? You’ve had a deal of learning now, Hester Wrenshaw, perhaps you can tell me ? ”

Hester Kirton alone sate in happy ignorance of her aunt’s blunder. As has been said, she had learned no French in her brief schooling, but, with her usual quick observation, she noticed the change in the faces of the rest. Mr. and Mrs. Wrenshaw pressed their lips hard to keep the corners from smiling. Lucy tried not to laugh out, and was vexed that her mother should have made such a jumble in company, and Jacob flourished his handkerchief again, and buried his face in it.

His action fortunately diverted Mrs. Frank’s attention.

“ You’ve dropped something, Mr. Bonham ; ”

but he assured her she was mistaken. "Ah, well, it was my fancy, then. I often pull something or other along with my handkerchief out of my gulf, as Lucy calls it."

Bonham was sensitive about being laughed at himself, and could not bear to laugh at others; and yet if Mrs. Frank recurred to the "popery" jar, he felt he must laugh outright, and she always enjoyed her mistakes to the full, blundering in every wrong direction possible before she found out the right one.

In his desperate nervousness to prevent such a contingency, he tried to start a fresh subject, and nothing would present itself but Lucy's London friend. He had meant to ask Mrs. Frank about him when they were alone together, but an irresistible impulse against his better reason now forced the question to his lips.

"Have you seen your London friend again?" He spoke half to Lucy, half to her mother, and then stood mute, overwhelmed by the effect of his words.

The tailor's bodkin did not work greater magic on Sir Piercie Shafton than this apparently innocent question on Hester and Lucy.

The former crimsoned painfully, and then became very pale, her firmly-set mouth and heaving bosom telling of inward emotion.

Lucy first started violently, and then looked very angry; but before either of them could speak, Mrs. Frank exclaimed, looking from one to the other with open eyes,—

“London friend!—who do you mean, Mr. Bonham? Why, Lucy, what’s the matter—who’s Mr. Bonham talking about?”

As her mother spoke, Lucy had gone close up to the doctor.

“Say you mean nothing, you must,” she said, with a flash in her eyes, and at the same time a quivering lip that made him feel guilty of some great offence towards her.

Lucy knew that had she been the doctor, she could have rectified such a blunder in an instant; but Jacob had none of her ready wit to help him out.

He smiled feebly, wishing himself up the chimney or under the table, or anywhere but where he was standing, with every one’s eyes fixed expectantly on his face.

“I—I was only joking with Miss Lucy, you

know, Mrs. Wrenshaw; doctors are allowed that privilege."

It was lamely said, and did not deceive sharp-eyed Mrs. Frank; and although her motherly feelings shielded Lucy from public questioning, she could not let them all think her so easily blinded.

"Oh, I dare say, doctor; very pretty indeed; but what's Hester got to do with it, then—is it your joke too, Hester?"

It was a hard struggle—an instant before she had despised Bonham for his falsehood, and now what was she to do? But she did not deliberate long; almost without apparent hesitation she raised her head and looked steadily at her aunt.

"Yes, aunt, you are right. Lucy will tell you about it another time."

"Well, I'm sure," said Mrs. Frank. The simple-hearted woman was more hurt than she chose to show. Lucy had never kept anything from her before, and Lucy—poor Lucy—was miserable; she dared not even look at her mother, she felt sure she should burst out crying if she did; to think that she should have had a secret from her—all for Hester's sake—a secret she had

found such difficulty in keeping, and that Hester for all reward was cross to her, and Jacob Bonham had betrayed her.

She looked up at him, intending to be full of indignation; but he seemed so utterly wretched that she pitied him.

There was an awkward silence, no one knowing exactly how to break it. It was a real relief when Hester said,—

“I don’t think we’ve got time to play cards, aunt, for father said he’d expect us by daylight, and it’s coming over dark fast now.”

She addressed herself to the elder Mrs. Wrenshaw, knowing how useless it would be to appeal to Mrs. Frank.

“I’m ready, dear. I have only to put on my bonnet and cloak.”

“Hadn’t you better stay here, Kitty?” said Mr. Wrenshaw to his sister-in-law, who was preparing to follow the others up-stairs; “if the whole flock goes to put on bonnets and things, it will take an hour or so. I know what those ‘last words’ are; they swell into sentences—paragraphs—sometimes chapters even; they’re as bad as yeast dumplings.”

The drive to Kirton's Farm was a silent one. The only talkative member of the party, Mr. Wrenshaw, had a great dislike to driving in the dusk, especially a horse he was not used to ; his wife was thinking over old times, which the sight of her two nieces had recalled vividly, and Hester was glad to be left to her own meditations.

She wondered whether her aunt or uncle would mention what Mr. Bonham had said, before her father. No, it was not likely, they were not chatter-boxes, like aunt Frank. Hester had a contempt for talkative people, her belief being that they never thought—she could not do both easily, therefore it seemed more natural to think others could not do so either.

They were soon at the farm-gate. Hester jumped down and opened it, cautioning her uncle against the large stones lying about.

“ I'll mind, my dear : don't you be afraid,” he answered. He disliked being in any way schooled by a woman, and he prided himself on his driving.

As they approached the house, the door opened and Mr. Kirton appeared ; a small bit of tallow candle, fixed on a save-all, held up above his head ;

he had just sent Biz to the kitchen, half crying at the stern rebuke he had administered for her wanton extravagance. She had come to the door as soon as she heard the wheels with a pair of candles, mounted up in two tall brass candlesticks ; “one gave such a mossel o’ light,” she said, and Mr. Wrenshaw might break his neck over the stones.

Ralph Kirton helped his sister-in-law to alight, and then shook hands with his visitors ; it was a formal greeting with little of heart in it.

Hester passed on rapidly and threw open the parlour door ; she then, spite of her father’s warning looks, called to Biz to bring another candle, and asked her guests if they would not have some supper ; fortunately they both refused, and Mrs. Wrenshaw said she was tired and should be glad to go to her room when she had wished good-night.

Poor Hester took up a candle with a heavy heart ; she had done all she could for her aunt’s comfort, but she bitterly felt the contrast the gaunt, bare, carpetless room up-stairs made to the comfortable bed-chamber at Mrs. Frank’s.

CHAPTER XVII.

DOCTOR AND NURSE.

“ I TELL you what, Hester,” said Mr. Wrenshaw to his wife, as he was shaving himself next morning in his bedroom at Kirton’s Farm; “ we should have come here first; we’ve changed our quarters for the worse; it’s as bad as shaving with a blunt razor.”

“ Hush, Robert! I can’t bear you to say it, because of that poor child. Did you see how ashamed she looked last night, when her father came to the door with that wretched bit of candle in his hand ? ”

“ Don’t talk about him,” said Mr. Wrenshaw, making a very ugly grimace; “ or I shall cut myself, perhaps. I’ve a great mind to ask for my bill when I go away; I wish to my heart we’d never come.”

“Never mind,” said his wife; “it will only be for two days, and it gives us an opportunity we could not otherwise have had of seeing something of poor Hester.”

“Seeing something; you may well say that, my dear,” said her husband; “she is pretty enough to look at; but she scarcely speaks a word, poor thing.”

“She might have been shy yesterday; she will be more herself at home, very likely. I cannot help being very much drawn to her; there is something superior about her, spite of her imperfect education.”

“Well,” said her husband, as he sate carefully stropping his razor, “I’ll not question your discernment, Hester—I don’t say I don’t like superior women, because of course I might get into trouble,” and he looked slyly at his wife; “but give me Lucy in preference to her cousin, any day. She’s my sort of girl, so heartily full of fun and spirits; and yet she’s neither silly nor bold.”

“She’s a very sweet girl; but I suppose it is because I know you’ll like her the best, that I’m trying to make you like poor Hester too: one thing is certain—little as I have seen of her, if I

were in any trouble or difficulty, I should much prefer Hester's counsel to Lucy's."

"And I shouldn't, with all due deference to you, my dear; when I'm in trouble, I like a little soothing and comforting, to be cheered, in fact; now, I take it, Lucy'd be the very girl for that. Hester'd give you good advice, no doubt, and expect you to go and follow it directly, perhaps reprove you if you didn't. The sort of way some mothers pick up children when they tumble—they set 'em on their legs with a shake and a 'how dare you?' and perhaps add a threat of a whipping if it happens again. Now, my mother was something like Lucy; I think the child takes after her. She used always to kiss us and comfort us, and blame the chair or the stairs, or anything but us, for our downfalls."

Mrs. Wrenshaw laughed, but she told him he would certainly keep breakfast waiting if they talked any longer, and then she went downstairs.

Ralph Kirton tried to be agreeable, but as Mr. Wrenshaw afterwards remarked, he was not much better at it than a bear at dancing; he had rather a strange notion of hospitality; he writhed when

he heard Hester pressing her aunt to eat more bread and butter, and talked generally more about the price and scarcity of provisions than any other subject. They were still at breakfast—Hester had contrived to persuade her father to have meals in the parlour, during the visit—when Biz came in.

“Here, Muss Heaster, you be wanted. Peter Stasson’s took as bad as bad, and Faith be at the back door a-cryin’ an’ a-sobbin’ like a pump, a’most.”

Mr. Kirton gave an angry grunt.

Hester looked up calmly.

“Tell Faith to wait, I’ll come in a minute or so——”

And without seeming to hurry, she told her aunt a few particulars about Peter, and then begged her to excuse her for a while; but she did not leave the table till her guests had finished; a secret consciousness told her that in her absence their breakfast might not be so satisfactory as she wished.

At the back door stood Faith, a delicate-looking girl herself, in sad trouble.

She was scarcely intelligible, but Hester managed to gather that her father, after several days of restlessness, and total loss of sleep and appetite,

had suddenly fainted that morning, when he had returned home to breakfast.

He was still lying, as Faith said, half dead. Hester bid her saddle Bob (who was to remain with the carriage to re-convey the Wrenshaws to Stedding), and go down town at once, and fetch Mr. Bonham, and then she went through the farm, with her quick, firm step, to Peter's little cottage. Poor Mrs. Stasson met her at the door, her sickly baby in her arms; the child was teething, suffering the unknown agonies so often disregarded as peevishness and "fractiousness." The mother seemed to have lost all power of quieting the writhing, wailing creature, but Hester took it from her at once, and soothed it, swaying it gently backwards and forwards, while she listened to the poor woman's fears about her husband.

She said she more than dreaded it was the fever, and, if it was, what would become of 'em all? for he so weak and that, he'd be down liker six weeks than one, "and how shall I feed these?" she said, looking round helplessly at four other little ones who stood huddled in a corner, with their fingers in their mouths staring at "Muss Kirton."

Peter's wife was a poor, helpless body, Hester knew, at the best of times. She had left Stedding early in life for London service; her mistress had taken a liking to her, and had her educated, and, unluckily for Peter, her pretty face had taken his fancy when she came down one Whitsuntide to see her friends. I scarcely know why I say unluckily; perhaps had she been a quick, clever manager, she would have had a sharp tongue and a temper to match, and have lacked the tenderness and gentleness that made her such a fond wife and mother.

She was literally overwhelmed by this calamity; it had crushed all helpfulness and woman's wit out of her.

Hester knew her too well to be surprised.

"I'd like to go up and see Peter, Jane. Here," she said, beckoning the eldest boy from the group; he was about eight, a roguish, intelligent looking child, who immediately poked out his chin, and dropped his head between his shoulders, as if something dreadful were going to happen.

"Come here," said Hester, decidedly.

The boy looked round at his sisters, as if taking

rnute counsel, but they only nestled their little rough heads closer together, grinning in that peculiar way for which their own word, "sniggering," is perhaps the aptest description.

Peter, for he was the eldest, looked up again at Hester, and something in her eye impelled him slowly towards her, grasping his corduroy trousers with each hand as if to steady himself.

"Now mind what I say, Peter: be a good boy—sit down on that stool; no, not on the edge; sit back and make a lap; there now, mind baby carefully till I come down again."

Small Peter's face looked very doleful; he didn't object to baby when she was good; but he hated squalling with true masculine hatred; he looked sullen as well as doleful, as the poor little thing set up a fresh cry at finding itself stationary. The poor mother was going to take baby again, but Hester stopped her.

"Be a good boy now and rock your knees like so; and if you keep baby good I'll bring you a bit of sugar maybe, presently."

This changed matters; he knew "Muss Heaster" always kept her word, and by means of that extraordinary fascination children exercise over each

other he somehow or other kept the poor little thing tolerably quiet.

Hester went up the creaking staircase in silence. Peter's room had a sloping ceiling, and although more in disorder than it might have been, it was clean ; but the atmosphere of fever was there already, that heated thickened air, which makes us almost see the demon Disease present, crowding up what empty space there may be, with his foul black wings.

Peter opened his eyes feebly and looked at her. His mind was evidently wandering, and what he said was so low and indistinct, that she could not catch its meaning.

Poor Jane hid her face in the patchwork curtain, and cried quietly ; but she was so evidently losing all power of self-control, that Hester beckoned her out of the room into a smaller one at the back, where Faith and some of the children slept.

As Hester closed the door after them, Mr. Stasson burst into hysterical sobs. Poor creature she had struggled as much as her weak nature could ; but the strain had been too sudden for her to bear up longer.

Hester stood by patiently, and presently the sobs became less frequent and violent.

“ Ah, Miss Kirton, you don’t know what it is ; you don’t know how hard it is to see your husband no better nor a child for help—him as is so good and so tender—him as takes all the cares and worrits off me, and when there’s a trouble or a fret, seems to make all smooth and right—and now there he lies—he can’t even tell me what he’d like, or what’s right to do. Oh! Peter, Peter ! ” and she burst into fresh sobs.

“ Now, look here, Jane,” said Hester, in a kind, motherly, but decided tone, as if she were years older than the other, “ you mustn’t fret and take on like this, because you’re not going to be left alone. I shall come across every day, and see what’s best to do. Yes—well,” she said, as if to check the poor woman’s thanks and blessings, which came forth as freely as her tears ; “ but there is a good deal for you to do, too, Jane—the great thing is to keep the house quiet. Isn’t there a neighbour would take some of the young ones in the day. Stay,” she said, “ I’ll go round to Alick’s wife myself; she’s a dirty thriftless woman, but she is very kind-hearted—I’ll see

what can be done. Mr. Bonham will tell us what's to be done about Peter when he comes, and I'll tell my aunt too."

What a blessed feeling it is in trouble to have some one to lean on—some one who will take both reins and whip too, guiding as well as counselling.

Half Jane Stasson's trouble seemed lightened as she followed Hester down-stairs.

The baby set up a cry, of course, as soon as she spied her mother; but Hester patted Peter on the head, and told him she would not forget the sugar, as he had kept baby quiet. She bade Mrs. Stasson send for her directly the doctor came, and then went round to speak to Alick's wife, who gladly promised to see after the children.

Hester had just finished telling Mr. Wrenshaw about poor Peter, when Faith came to say Mr. Bonham had arrived. She had met him not far from the farm, and he had come along with her.

Hester was glad of this interruption. Her aunt had protested against her plan of nursing Peter, on account of the infection, for she thought he probably had typhus fever; but Hester was

resolved to have her own will in the matter—it was all she could do; she had nothing else to give the poor fellow, and she had not the slightest fear of infection; but she felt sorry to disagree with her aunt, and was relieved when Mr. Bonham said he thought it was a low fever of a typhoid nature, but not typhus, and certainly not infectious.

He seemed so alert and self-possessed as he gave his directions that Hester could scarcely believe him the same nervous hesitating person she had seen the night before. She had taken a dislike to him and had dreaded seeing him, but she hoped he would be of use to Peter; and she had not hesitated to send for him. Still it was very unpleasant and painful that he, an entire stranger, should be in possession of her secret, for he must be; or what could he have meant by Lucy's London friend; but she forgot all this uncomfortableness, when she met him in Peter's bedroom. He was no longer Mr. Bonham, but the doctor, and his manner inspired her with confidence in his skill.

Jacob rode slowly away; he had to make a considerable circuit before he reached home, and had also a commission to execute for Hester.

How wrongly he had judged her; he had thought her cold, hard, and indifferent to the feelings of others, and here she was, willing to sacrifice health and comfort, to nurse a poor sick farm labourer. Jacob was tender-hearted and generous, and this charitable devotion quickly effaced the unfavourable impression former events had made upon him.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE LETTER DELIVERED.

LUCY WRENshaw was sitting at her pianoforte, feeling very dull and good-for-nothing, when Rachel put her head into the room. She looked red and mysterious; Lucy thought something must be the matter.

"Oh! if you please, miss, there's somethin' o' yours, I found it under the table this morning, when I was sweepin', and I put it in my pocket, and I never giv' it another thought, till I went up just now to clean myself."

She handed a crumpled and rather soiled letter to Lucy, looking slyly at her as she did so.

Lucy took it and turned it to see the address, and then she changed colour vividly, but she was not going to satisfy Rachel's curiosity. She put the letter down beside her, until the maid having

no excuse for staying, took her leave—burning to know how a sealed note, addressed to her young mistress, in a man's writing, happened to be on the floor; perhaps it was fortunate that the writer had an old-fashioned liking for sealing-wax.

Lucy's hands trembled as she held the letter, she knew fast enough whose the writing was; but how came the note there? She could not summon courage to open it, and then it suddenly occurred to her, that he had written to reprove her for having a secret from her mother, as if she had not been unhappy enough about that, as if she had not half cried her eyes out, when she implored her mother's pardon on the previous evening after they all went away. She opened the note in a puffet, but she had to read it twice over, before she could take in the sense of it, and then she burst into tears.

Could it, indeed, be true that Jacob loved her—that she might now love him with her whole heart, for the manly tone of the letter made him again the Jacob she had known at first, before he began to be nervous with her. She took it up and read it again—how full of love it was! how different to that other deceitful fellow's letter!

She wished her mother were at home, for she would tell her at once, there should be no more secrets between them; she knew she would be so pleased, and she was just thinking whether it would be worth while to go out and meet her, when in she came radiant with smiles and importance. She had just met the vicar, and he had stood and talked five whole minutes with her.

“And what an agreeable man he is, my dear, —so very genteel.”

“Yes, mamma, but now I—I—there, read that, —but to yourself, mind.”

And while her mother read, Lucy covered her face with her hands.

Mrs. Frank Wrenshaw, as soon as she had read the letter, behaved in a most indescribable manner between kissing and hugging her daughter, and laughing and crying, and wondering whether she should call Mr. Bonham “Jacob” the next time they met, and as to what Miss Jemima Skipper would have to say—when a new thought occurred to her.

“Did he leave the note himself?”

“I don’t know; Rachel said she found it under the table.”

“My gracious! how very odd! did he throw it in at the window? But I say, Lucy, you must write an answer at once, my dear. How could it have come? I must inquire about this.”

“I can’t, mamma,” said poor Lucy. “Oh, if he had only said it instead of writing!”

“Oh, that’s nonsense,” and Mrs. Frank was proceeding to argue according to her usual plan, by bringing forward illustrations of her different friends’ conduct under the same circumstances, when there came a double knock at the door, and in a minute Rachel appeared. She was evidently trying not to laugh, but the effort was not successful.

Mr. Bonham wanted to see Mrs. Wrenshaw; he had a message from Miss Kirton; he would not detain Mrs. Wrenshaw long.

“Yes, oh, yes, it’s all right, show him in,” said Mrs. Wrenshaw, in great excitement; and then, before Lucy could stop her, she slipped out through the other door, just as Rachel showed in Mr. Bonham.

Lucy felt strongly inclined to run after her, but Jacob was in the room before she had recovered from her surprise.

She rose and held out her hand as he came towards her, but she could not look at him ; her face and throat were suffused with blushes, she longed to cover her eyes with her hands.

“I did not mean to intrude on *you*, Miss Wrenshaw,” he said, hesitatingly. “I—I had only to give a message from Miss Kirton to your mamma.” He just took her offered hand, and let it drop instantly.

Lucy could raise her eyes now. What did it all mean? He was looking at the carpet, not at her. Was she in a dream, or was that letter a cruel hoax, not written by him at all? She trembled so that she could scarcely stand; but Jacob could not see it, he was still looking at the carpet.

“What is the message?” she said, at last, in such a fluttering voice that he started; but still he did not look up.

“Why, I’m sorry to say, a man named Peter Stasson—you—you know him, I think,” and a sudden flash of memory told him when and where he had seen the man before, and how plainly Lucy had shown her indifference on that luckless evening, “he’s very ill; and as it is certainly fever,

and your cousin is anxious to devote herself to nursing him, she thinks it will be better for you and Mrs. Wrenshaw not to go to Kirton's Farm. Your uncle and aunt will return early in the day."

"Is Hester going to nurse him? Have you agreed to it? Oh, Mr. Bonham, will it not be a risk?" She clasped her hands, and looked up in his face, forgetting everything but Hester's danger.

He was obliged to meet her eyes now; they were full of tears; she seemed to be imploring his counsel, and to be willing to yield to it.

He, too, felt in a dream; this was not the flippant, satirical girl he had so shrunk from last night; but she was waiting for his answer, and he must speak, although he would much rather have stood there, drinking in the soft sweetness of her eyes.

"No; I do not think there is any risk, I hope not—although, of course, nursing such an illness involves much fatigue and self-denial. I should think, from what I have seen of Miss Kirton this morning, that she would not shrink from either."

A sudden spasm of jealousy crushed poor Lucy's heart so tightly in its iron fingers, that

she could scarcely breathe. This, then, was the key of the mystery. Hester's strength of mind and nobleness—for poor Lucy thought the two expressions synonymous—had robbed her of Jacob's love, for he had loved her, and he had written that letter to tell her so; but had she not always told herself she was too weak and unworthy to fix any man's love? Yesterday evening had completed Hester's charm: he had dropped that note from his pocket, and now he would never know she had seen it: he would think he had destroyed it, as he doubtless meant to do. She was not angry with him, only she knew she was broken-hearted. She remembered how, after she had planned their meeting, her secret dread lest Jacob should prefer Hester—and now it had come to pass; but Hester must have been to blame. How greedy of her, with a lover of her own, to rob Lucy of all her happiness! and they would meet constantly at Peter Stasson's; yet she did not believe Hester loved Jacob—could she be a bad designing girl, after all?—and here a sudden thought struck Lucy. Hester might try to conceal her share in the revelation of last night, by throwing it all on her cousin, and if Jacob recollects her

angry manner, he would believe it too ; she was so utterly wretched, she could scarcely keep back her tears ; but one thing she had resolved on, she would rather die than let him know that he had dropped that letter.

“ Ah, you have been to see Peter,” she said, almost unconsciously.

Jacob hardly heard her : he was thinking intently over all that had passed on the previous evening. What could have caused the change in Lucy’s manner ? She had spoken to him almost fiercely, and now she was timid, almost sad ; and then he remembered his unlucky question—perhaps he had made mischief between her and her mother, and she was unhappy in consequence. The thought tore through all the fences which doubt, distrust, or wounded pride had reared round his love, and sprang to his lips almost without his will.

“ Miss Wrenshaw, I am afraid—in fact, I am sure—I—I grieved you last night, by asking that foolish indiscreet question. I ought to have asked your forgiveness then, but, somehow, I believe, I thought you were too much offended to grant it—and—and—do you forgive me ? ”

“I was very silly to be angry,” said poor Lucy, her tears coming now, spite of her struggle to keep them back, “but I had never had a secret from mamma before, and it so grieved me that she should hear it from any one but myself.” She longed to say, “it was not my secret,” but that would be seeming to talk too much of herself to him now.

Her words and manner agitated him strangely: she spoke as simply as a child, but how could she talk on such a subject to him at all, for he imagined that she had met Hallam unknown to her mother. Still he could not shrink from her confidence, she spoke so gently and trustingly; but it was hard to be treated like a brother by Lucy—it was almost more than he could bear.

There was a pause; it gave Lucy time to think. Why should she shrink from this, the only opportunity she might have of righting herself with Jacob? She had lost his love; that she could not, would not seek to regain, but why, just for Hester’s sake, should she lose his good opinion? for it struck her suddenly now, that her cousin’s meeting with Mr. Hallam was not accidental, and Mr. Bonham might be thinking all this while

the same thing of her; fortunately, no lurking hope betrayed itself that this might be the reason of his coldness, or I am afraid Lucy's pride would have scorned to take any steps to recall his love; she told herself she only did not want to lose his good opinion, so she went on, looking at him appealingly,—

“Mr. Bonham, will you do me a great favour?”

“I will do anything in the world for you,” he said, passionately, for her eyes had driven him almost beside himself again.

“I want you not to mention about—about my London friend to any one, please; he is not my friend at all, but,” she was going on, but the words almost choked her. What right had he to such an explanation, after all? She stood blushing.

Jacob started; the mist began to clear a little, but his love gave no time for thought or judgment.

He took Lucy's hand.

“Miss Wrenshaw, did you mean what you said just now—not *your* friend?”

Lucy trembled more and more: that wonderful, indescribable sensation she had first known fully

under the oak-trees, was again taking possession of her ; she did not think either, but she knew, that Jacob loved her ; his hand trembled till it seemed to vibrate through her whole being. She knew everything now ; the magic of that grasp revealed it—his love, his jealousy, all—she did not want to speak, or move, or in any way break the soft spell of happiness—that happiness, the consciousness that the love we covet is our own —there are no words to tell the bliss that first moment brings.

But the pressure of the hand that held hers roused her.

“ Yes, indeed, it is true,” she said, and she looked up at him, to clear away any lingering doubt.

“ Then, Lucy,” said Jacob,—“ I must call you Lucy—I did not mean to say this to you, because I thought you cared for some one else, but I have been nearly mad since that evening ; perhaps I am mad now,” he said, hoarsely, passing his hand over his forehead. “ Will you say to me, in your own dear voice, that you are quite heart free ? ”

Lucy smiled.

The smile was enough for Jacob, his arm was round her in an instant, and, in hurried, breathless

words, he was telling his love—his passionate love for her; but poor Lucy could scarcely listen, the change from grief to joy had been too sudden, and she hid her face and sobbed on his bosom.

He let her cry quietly there a little while, and then he lifted up her face.

“Lucy, are you really my own Lucy, or is this all a dream?”

She smiled up at him. “Shall you never be sorry?”

“Sorry, you little darling? It is you, Lucy, who ought to think of that; but I cannot let you think of it; it may be selfish, but I am not going to let you think twice about it, you might change your mind;” he pressed her yet more closely to him.

“Poor darling, how its little heart flutters! did I frighten you by my suddenness? I ought to have been more careful; were you very much surprised, Lucy?”

She laughed and gently tried to disengage herself. She felt more courageous again now, and almost disposed to be saucy.

“No, I was not really surprised, I was puzzled by your manner; after what I had just read, I

thought," she said, mischievously, "*you* had changed your mind."

He looked surprised, but he started in utter amazement, when she held up the letter to him.

"Why, that's a letter I wrote some days ago; how ever did you get it, Lucy?" and he tried to take it from her.

But she held it fast, vowing she would not say how she got it, and she would never part with it. She even intimated that the letter was much nicer than he was, till he declared she had picked his pocket, and ought to be punished for such a transgression.

"You are mine now, dearest," he whispered, as he bent down to kiss her; "you will be mine altogether before long, won't you, my own darling Lucy?"

CHAPTER XIX.

UNDER THE OAK.

WEEKS had passed by. Peter Stasson was pronounced convalescent, but it seemed as if he would never regain even the amount of health he had before his illness: a constant wearing back-ache rendered stooping almost an impossibility. But for Hester, Ralph Kirton would have filled up his place long ago; she was his firm friend, and would not hear of his dismissal.

She had grown paler during his illness, but it had been a blessing to her in many ways.

It had diverted her mind from the constant thought of Hallam, and had thus prevented the fits of abstraction which had so irritated her father. She was happy again now; she felt grateful [that to please her he had so broken through all his prejudices as to invite her uncle

and aunt, and far more that he had permitted her to nurse Peter.

The father and daughter had never been so happy together before. Ralph Kirton noticed her softened manner and approved it, although with his usual misanthropy he guessed she was only trying to get the soft side of him on account of Peter. He did her an injustice; but then Ralph Kirton only studied human nature with an eye to his own advantage—all better feelings and motives and inner springs remaining unrevealed. He ought to have judged Hester better. If she wanted to ask a favour, she would have been far more likely to do it in a proud blunt way, without any attempt to prepossess, simply because she so hated any double or false dealing.

That meeting with Hallam had been a sore trial; but for his express prohibition she must have told her father; she had quite determined that if she saw Hallam again—and she longed for this greatly—she would say, at the risk of displeasing him, that she could not keep it secret from her father.

She had come to this determination as she sate

by Peter Stasson's bedside, and listened to his delirious wanderings. She thought it would be dreadful to be seized with illness with a secret-burdened mind ; she saw that the inner care or anxiety was sure then to be revealed. Poor Peter, who had never grumbled to his wife when in health, raved constantly of her careless, thoughtless ways as he lay helpless and unconscious on his bed.

Hester felt thankful that the poor woman had not been left alone to nurse him. Her weak spirit might have broken at what she would have considered her husband's unkindness, and now she was fast learning, under Hester's decided, clear instructions, how to manage better for herself. It may be kind to do things for people; it is surely far kinder to make them, either by example or teaching, self-helpful.

Hester was born to command, and she was exercising this hitherto dormant talent for the first time. Perhaps nothing frets and worries the temper so much as allowing a talent either to rust or remain undeveloped; the very exercise of it brings happiness, because it brings full employment either to head or hands, and there

can be no want of cheerfulness where there is plenty to do, unless in exceptional cases.

Lucy had written her cousin a rapturous description of her happiness; she had lost all remembrance of her unkindness, but she had not been over to Kirton's Farm. Her mother, spite of the doctor's assurances, had so greatly dreaded infection, that she had forbidden Lucy's visits, and had gladly accepted for her an invitation from Mrs. Wrenshaw to spend a fortnight with them on their return to London. Hester sighed when she heard of it; it was well for the harmony between her and her father that she did not know how urgently her aunt, and afterwards her uncle, had begged that she might accompany Lucy in her visit. Kirton had refused, and at last so harshly, that old Mr. Wrenshaw had said to him just as they were leaving to return to Stedding,—

“I tell you what, Kirton, to be plain with you, you're foolish, after all; you're older than either my wife or I, and in the case of your girl being left alone in the world, we are her natural protectors; therefore, I must say, I think the more she sees of us the better.”

Ralph Kirton pressed his thin lips together.

“I have never asked you to be Hester’s guardian that I’m aware of; it will be time enough for her to be seeking a home, when I’m taken away from her; and it isn’t always the oldest that goes first,” he added, with a sneer.

They were all three standing in the parlour while this talk was going on. Hester was out in front, helping a boy to put the pony to, and then stowing her aunt’s bag and wraps into the little back seat of the carriage. So she was safe out of hearing. Mrs. Wrenshaw pressed her husband’s arm, for she saw his colour rising; but he was not a man to nourish a grudge. He held the old maxim: it is better to reprove than to be angry secretly—a maxim sadly perverted by universal faultfinders; but which Mr. Wrenshaw seldom took advantage of. He and his wife had talked much to Biz about Hester and her cheerless, solitary life; and, as she was their godchild, he felt that he was justified in making an unusual effort for her advantage.

“I don’t want to seem meddling in any way, Kirton; but she’s Janet’s child, and I can’t think so very quiet a life, without any change in it,

good for a young girl. I'd give her a few more advantages, if I were you ; I would, indeed. It's but natural you shouldn't, at your time of life, care about change ; but you see the case is different with young folks ; the surest way to keep them cheerful and steady is to let them see a little of each other." His wife pulled his coat sleeve warningly, for she had been watching Ralph's face ; but the independent old man went on. "I say again, I don't want to seem meddling or interfering ; but I wish you'd think it over, and let us have Hester every now and then : a week or two at a time."

"I gave you your answer just now," said Kirton, doggedly. He controlled the resentment he felt at his brother-in-law's interference, for he thought the Wrenshaws must have taken a liking to Hester, or they would not wish to have her with them. "She's happy enough where she is ! if she went abroad she might get wants and wishes for things I can't afford to give her. Thank you all the same," he said, looking at Mrs. Wrenshaw instead of her husband ; "but I think she's best to keep her own home and station, for the present."

His strong power over himself had enabled him to make the end of this speech much more civil, both in words and tone, than the beginning. But in the evening, he wrote to Mr. Goldsmith, asking him to meet him at a station on the London side of Stedding, to make some alteration in his will. By this means he avoided the expense of entertaining his friend at Kirton Farm, and also, what was of still greater moment, the chance of Goldsmith's being recognized in Stedding, or of questions being asked at the farm, for to be known to employ a London lawyer would, of course, suggest the probability of the rumour—which it was his daily effort to live down—that he was rich.

Hester was disappointed that she had seen so little of her aunt; but Peter was in such a dangerous state during the first week of her attendance on him, that she had no leisure to brood over this thought; perhaps it filled her mind more now that he no longer required her services.

“ Well, Muss Heaster,” said Biz one afternoon. “ A do say, that a do, that Peter ought to do a deal to show how thankful he be for yer care

and yer nussing; but ere-a-mussy not he, I warrant ye—and as for Jane, she grateful! you might as well expect the conger in the parlour there to show gratitoode for being cleaned and stuffed, and made to look nice. He'd like to be at his nasty ways again in the river mud, he 'ood, just as she'd like to go back to all she's shiftlessness."

"Well, I hope you are mistaken, Biz; she seems thankful enough, at all events."

"Thankful. I don't misdoubt, muss, but what she'll allus be thankful and to spare in she's words—words is cheap eno'—not but what I don't think people should be civil, but its goin's on and doin's I cares for more nor words and courtesyings. Ere-a-mussy, there be some folk, and Jane Stasson be one on 'em, as wears all their feelings outside 'em, and don't keep none for their innards. Ye can't say a word out, but ye blister she somewhere; she be hurt in a minute, but as to recollectin' what yer been a-teachin' on she, Muss Heaster, not she."

Hester smiled, for although Biz had probably more depth, or, as she said, more "innards" of feeling, she was one of the touchiest of that

sensitive class, domestic servants, and how sensitive they are—but so well is the feeling hidden under the outward mask of calm civility they compel themselves to wear, that it often baffles even a keen observer.

Spite of his rigid methodical habits, Ralph Kirton had a way of keeping tea waiting, which irritated Biz extremely. Her moral cowardice and natural fear of her master prevented her from showing this openly, but she always managed to make him in some way suffer for what she called, behind his back, such “unreg’lar goin’s on.” There was a heavy wooden stool in the wash-house, on which she mounted when she wanted to place some of her saucepans on a high shelf, and she used, when he had transgressed, to drag this stool gratingly over the inner brick floor in such an unnecessary manner, that Kirton was sometimes obliged to call out that he “couldn’t and wouldn’t stand it.”

He generally preferred enduring it, as he perfectly understood its motive, and the suppressed grumbling that was sure to follow an outbreak from him, was almost as unpleasant.

Even Hester began to wonder this evening at

her father's delay — at last she went out into the yard to look for him, expecting to see him come over Picket Acre field; but he was not to be seen, and yet she knew he went in that direction.

Perhaps he had taken a round, and might be returning by the road after all.

She walked to the front of the house. It was growing so dusk, that at first she could not distinguish anything near the entrance gate; but she heard the sound of voices, and as she leaned against the palings in front of the house, shading her eyes with her hand, she saw that two figures were standing in the deeper gloom of the great oak-tree, apparently talking earnestly. A moment more, and she discerned that one was her father, but who the other man was she could not distinguish. Her father held the gate half open with one hand, and stood in the passage thus made, as if to prevent the other person from entering.

Who was the other?

Hester felt curious, and was just advancing towards them, when the figure in the shadow moved slightly away from Kirton, and stood out

clear and distinct in the fast waning light. Who was it? Hester's throbbing heart told her too surely, and she instinctively retreated and crept quickly out of sight, agitated as she had never felt before, for that her father was very angry she was sure from his vehement gesticulations.

Angry! Ralph Kirton had suspected and doubted through his whole life all those belonging to him, and although he had naturally, by this treatment, created deceit and cunning among those he employed, still his hardest suspicions had never been fully justified; in him suspicion was a natural growth, not the graft of circumstance. And now to find that what he had almost laughed at himself for believing was a bitter truth; that all his care to seclude his child from the society of her kind, had been thrown away; that he had been blind when his sight should have been keenest, roused every angry and indignant feeling to vehement action.

He had taken the round by the high road, as Hester had surmised, and just as he reached his own gate, Mr. Frederic Hallam appeared a short distance off.

Kirton had written to Mr. Goldsmith about Hallam, and the lawyer had much tranquillized his mind, by assuring him of the young man's aptitude for business, and his conviction that he had thought of business only while at Kirton's Farm, so that for the moment the farmer thought his friend had sent him down with some message, or private instructions (although, as he had himself so lately seen Goldsmith, this seemed improbable), and as soon as Hallam came up with him, he asked if this were the case.

"Not in any way; this is a visit of pleasure," replied Hallam, with perfect coolness. "I found myself in your neighbourhood, Mr. Kirton, and wished to renew my acquaintance with you."

Ralph Kirton looked hard at him.

"You've, perhaps, forgotten what I told you sir. I don't love strangers, nor do I consort with 'em."

"Ah, but you can't consider me a stranger now, my dear sir," said Hallam, with a good-humoured smile, that would have made his bright frank face irresistible to most men. "You will admit me as an old acquaintance, I feel sure, and give me a cup

of tea. "Allow me," and he laid his hand on the gate as if to open it.

"Not so fast, young man; you don't know much of life, or you'd have learned before this never to be sure of anything." As he spoke he opened the gate and stood facing Hallam, so that he could not pass, grim and stern enough to withstand any intrusion.

But Frederic Hallam was resolute; he had paid two fruitless visits to the farm lately, and after prowling about for some time, had walked boldly up to the house, and learned from Biz that no one was at home, as Hester was at the other side of the farm with her father, and would not be back till late.

Resolute—he was almost desperate—his debts were innumerable, and this old man, by a stroke of his pen, could make him free from the haunting fear of arrest, that was daily approaching certainty.

It would not be the first time he had carried the day by consummate assurance.

"Mr. Kirton," he said, boldly, "I will be frank with you. I did not come here only to see you; I—the fact is, I am deeply attached to your daughter."

He looked so honest still, it was wonderful Ralph Kirton could doubt him.

“My daughter!” gasped the old man—the unexpected declaration almost deprived him of words. “Hester!”

“Yes, and I think when I ——”

“And you have the assurance to stand there,” Kirton went on vehemently, “and say to me that you are deeply attached to a girl to whom you never spoke above a word or two—whom you saw for about half an hour. Now hark ye here, Mr. Jack-a-napes,” passion and fear together had mastered his self-control, “I know your game; you’ve heard some of these confounded lies people talk, that I’ve got money and that my girl’ll have it too; she won’t—she won’t, not a farthing. I tell ye, she’s a beggar; isn’t she dressed liked a beggar? don’t she live like one? and you dare to pretend to me, you—you smooth-spoken rascal—you who call yourself a gentleman—that you want to take a girl like that for your wife, and make a lady of her, because—because you’re in love with her?”

“Now, gently, my good friend,” interposed Hallam, in his blandest manner; he laid his hand

on the farmer's arm, who threw it off indignantly. "Don't excite yourself; look at the thing calmly now. Half an hour! why, Miss Kirton's pretty enough to make a man fall in love with her in five minutes; you wrong me, indeed you do!"

"But Kirton would not listen.

"No, no; you double-faced humbug! I'm not doting yet, and even if I were what you fancy, and had money to leave my girl, not a farthing of it should she touch unless she married with my consent. Be off with ye—you don't come again under my roof—you know my mind now; and look ye, if ever I catch you skulking here again, I'll not leave a whole bone in your skin."

He raised his stick as he spoke.

Hallam was not a coward, but he saw it would do his cause more harm than good to persist just then; his wonderful power of self-restraint did not fail him now—it never did where his own interest was concerned; but his blood tingled at Kirton's coarse, insulting words.

"You are excited, Mr. Kirton, and say things you don't mean; some day you will find out how greatly you have wronged me, and will be sorry

for your present ungenerous conduct. I'll say good-day to you."

He turned slowly away, and sauntered down the lane, while the farmer sank against the gate-post, almost suffocated by the violence of the conflicting passions within.

CHAPTER XX.

KIRTON'S RESOLVE.

RALPH KIRTON stood leaning against the gate. Not to think over what he had heard—fixed thought was impossible just then—the passion he had partly let loose was not half exhausted ; he felt it throbbing through all his frame, and dilating his heart till it seemed to be choking him. Body and mind were mingled in a wild chaos of resentment. About what?

He scarcely knew yet ; he only felt that he had been betrayed. He suspected everybody, and he did not know how far the mischief might have spread.

He told himself this as the inward tumult became less violent ; it still continued to rage, but the outward trembling was not so apparent.

At length—he hardly knew how long he had

been there—he rose from his leaning posture, and walked slowly towards the house.

Did Hester know of this fellow's visit? was she expecting him? had there been meetings—clandestine correspondence?—ah! and he suddenly remembered the evening he had watched her stealthily from the doorway, as she sate reading a letter; and when he had come in quickly and quietly, to surprise her, she had crumpled it into her pocket with some careless excuse. This rascal had been writing to her, filling her young head with flattery and trash; now he understood her passionate fits and moody silence. And Goldsmith, did he know, or was he duped too? No,—the miser argued to himself,—Goldsmith could not know of it; most of his money was already in his hands, and in the event of his own death, the rest would come to his care, until Hester was of age. It must be to his interest to keep her unmarried as long as possible. Yes, yes, that was a good stroke of policy. Lucy, was she in the secret of these visits?

He started to find himself at the kitchen door, still in such a tangle of doubt; he had gone round the house mechanically.

He stood still with a sudden effort, as one reins

in a horse on the brow of a hill. What should he do? Speak to Hester; the idea scarcely crossed his mind; straight, open dealing was not Ralph Kirton's habit.

He must watch her closely; question Biz as to what she might have heard or observed. There was Peter Stasson too; Hester's interest in him had been lately greater than ever; perhaps he was in this Hallam's pay—who could tell what system of deceit had been practised by them all against him? He shook again with mingled terror and rage, as he thought this.

And yet Hester's truthful face, and her rough bluntness from childhood upwards, seemed to force themselves on his memory, and to tell him he was wronging her; that in her, at least, was no deceit. But this excuse for her was only weak folly. Parents always made excuses for their children, he knew that. Still it was not likely that young spendthrift—he felt sure he was one—he looked like it—would have dared to come after Hester if he had not had some encouragement. Every moment strengthened his doubts, and heaped fresh fuel on the fire of his suspicions.

His hand was on the door, and still he had not

decided what to do, and he must before he went in to Hester.

He walked back again to the angle of the house, and stood there, determined not to move till his mind was made up. What had come over him? This decision, so utterly unknown to him, irritated him almost as much as his suspicions. He had to stand there some minutes, before he could force his mind to obey his will, before he could steady his purpose from the swaying movement that seemed to pervade his whole frame.

After a while he slowly turned towards the door again; he had determined not to speak to Hester till he had altered his will; he would affix a codicil, disinheriting her entirely, if she married without his consent, or, in the event of his death, without Goldsmith's; And if she married Mr. Hallam, cutting her off with 50*l.* a year, to prevent the utter misery such a marriage must entail upon her. He had long ago settled what to do with his money in the event of Hester's death before his own; it would be parcelled out between a hundred different charities and public institutions, so as to be of no special benefit to any. Perhaps he thought thus to save his memory even the reproach of

being considered rich. But he would watch the girl closely ; ah ! and Biz too ; and if that old fool had been artful enough to deceive him, she should sniffer for it ; she should turn out at once. Hester had grown woman enough for them to manage very well without her, if they took Faith S^tasson, who'd want no wage at all, but be glad to come for the sake of her victuals.

He opened the door and went into the kitchen, well inclined to pick a quarrel with Biz, but the women exclaimed so loudly at his approach that he was silenced for the moment.

“ Father, father ! ” cried Hester, “ what ails you ? you’re as white as death.”

“ White ! do ‘ee call he ? ” chimed in Biz ; “ it’s white sure enough, but its full o’ green and yaller streaks, and look at his throat, it’s a’most purple. Ere-a-mussy, master, sit ‘ee down, and loose yer handkercher, and I’ll run and get ye a burnt feather.”

Hester had untied his cravat while the old woman spoke ; but, spite of his ghastly complexion, the veins that stood out on his forehead and throat like knotted cords, and the cold faintness he felt, Kirton would not own that he was ill.

They were not to bother over him ; he had had a long trudge by the high road, he said ; flat-walking always tired him more than the fields. He should be all right again when he'd had a cup of tea.

Hester looked at Biz, but the old woman said nothing ; if the master liked to be ill, why he must take his own way ; she wur not a-goin' to thrust her head into a tiger's mouth, to make sure his teeth were sound, not she.

“ Tea's all set now, Muss Heaster, and has been this hour.” And then she made her escape into the washhouse as if she dreaded a storm.

But Hester felt alarmed.

“ Father, it's no use saying you're not ill, I'm sure you are ; let me send for Mr. Bonham.”

“ Stuff, child! I tell you I'm a bit tired, that's all. Send for the doctor, indeed ! and who's to pay him when he comes ?” He tried to smile—it was a gnastly grimace.

“ Father, if you saw your face you'd say, best pay a little money than run the risk of a fit, and that's what may be over you.” She spoke in her hard, stern way ; it seemed to her wicked to throw away life for the sake of saving money, but she

also felt just then, spite of her cold manner, how much she really loved her father.

He made her no answer, but looked at her steadily.

"Give me some tea," he said at last. He drank it down thirstily, but she noticed how the cup shook in his hand. He seemed annoyed by her scrutiny.

"You fill cups so full," he grumbled. "Such waste, they're sure to spill when they're over-filled ; there, that'll do, child : why don't ye drink yer own tea instead of garping at me like a frighted frog ? "

She tried to swallow, but the tea seemed to choke her.

"Father, I can't ; I'm anxious about you," she said more tenderly than she had perhaps ever spoken. "Isn't there something you could take better than tea ? "

"All I want, child, 's rest and quietness," he said, gruffly. The imploring expression of his eyes had disarmed his anger. "I'll be all right to-morrow when I've had a sleep."

No more was said till the meal was over. Then Kirton looked at his watch, and said they were

so late, they'd not want supper. Hester could tell Biz, they'd best all get to bed betimes.

He went into his den as soon as he felt the physical power to do so, and fetched out a huge account-book—his usual substitute for the solace of a pipe, an extravagance he never indulged in. Hester sate on the opposite side of the fire on a low stool, her lap full of stockings, for, besides her own and her father's, she had, since Peter's illness, undertaken to help Mrs. Stasson in her weekly mending; it was no easy matter to darn the enormous holes, sometimes involving the loss of the entire heel, by the light of a single tallow candle, especially as to-night, her father's sight seeming dimmer than usual, he pulled the candle so near him.

As she looked up every now and then, as if to take in a fresh supply of light, she continually met his eyes, not fixed openly on her, but in sly covert glances; he seemed trying to make out her thoughts, or suspicious of what she might be doing.

Just as she lit her candle, and was going up to bed, with the usual nodded good-night to her father, he said abruptly, with the same stolen glance at her,—

“How long, maybe, is it since that young spark came down here on Goldsmith’s business?”

“Near upon two months or more,” she said, after a moment’s pause; then she coloured deeply, she could not help it.

“Do you call to mind what his name was?” he said, looking at her more decidedly now.

“Yes: Mr. Hallam, father.” She knew they had met, and she felt desperate. “Why are you asking me these questions, father? you have some reason for it.”

Directly the words were spoken, she would have recalled them if she could—they seemed to have escaped without her knowledge.

To her great surprise, her father did not heed them; he dropped his eyes and said, carelessly,—

“There, go to bed, child; I’m tired to-night, I tell ‘ee. Good-night.”

The relief to Hester was so unexpected that she stood still, wonder-struck. Then she bent down over him, and kissed his forehead—a rare caress for her.

“I hope you’ll be better to-morrow, father,” she said, and left the kitchen.

CHAPTER XXI.

A SUMMONS.

HESTER passed a sleepless night.

What could be the meaning of her father's manner? She must have been wrong in imagining that he was angry with Mr. Hallam; if so, he would not have spoken of him so quietly. Had Mr. Hallam been making friends with her father, been asking leave to come and see her, as Jacob Bonham did Lucy? had he consented?—she could not believe in such happiness. But would it be happiness? would not it be constant heart-burning and mortification to see him, with his refined notions, annoyed by all the meannesses which had so fretted her during her aunt's visit? She was sure Mr. Hallam was used to much finer ways than her uncle's and aunt's even. No, it would never do for him to visit at Kirton's

Farm; and yet how she longed to see him once more, to be quite sure he had not forgotten her; he had asked her to be his friend; she would never forget him at any rate. But then her father's gestures and subsequent agitation showed that he had been angry. What would come of it? She fell into a short, disturbed sleep every now and then, but always to start awake again, with the feeling that something dreadful was going to happen to her, for that an explanation with her father of some kind was impending, she felt sure.

Morning came at last, rosy-streaked and cheering. Early riser as she was, she had somehow overslept herself this morning. She had not heard her father's awakening tap at her door, and her room was so full of sunshine when she opened her eyes that she sprang out of bed in alarm—it must be past six o'clock.

She looked out of the window to see if her father was about; there was no one crossing the farmyard; all lay still in the sweet, unbroken calm and clear light of early morning. As Hester looked at it, it seemed impossible that care or worry could thrust themselves into such

a scene of peace. During the night, a large web had been spun across her lattice; she could not open it without destroying the frail, beautiful manufacture, and although she was not troubled with her cousin Lucy's vivid imagination or admiration for such things, she felt unwilling to break it: it looked like silver lace as the sunlight glittered on the dew-drops frosted over its surface.

Voices below the window roused her to full consciousness, and broke the peaceful spell that had held her there. She dressed herself hastily, and, as she did so, came the remembrance that something disagreeable was before her. Would her father speak that morning about Mr. Hallam, or would he let it go on? She thought the latter; she knew he disliked to speak openly, and although she wished it over, she too closely resembled him, not to feel glad that she had time to consider: something or other might happen to prevent any explanation at all; she should rejoice if it were so, and then came the remembrance of his pale face; she wondered how he felt this morning.

She found Biz in the kitchen in a very cross mood, but then Biz shared the habit so com-

mon to her sex of being always cross before breakfast.

"I'm late," said Hester. "Has father been in from his rounds yet?" She felt anxious, if he were angry with her, that he should have no further cause of displeasure by being kept waiting for breakfast.

"I dwon't knaow," said Biz. "It's hard enough to have everything to see to an' all, without being expected to know everything as well."

Hester usually set the breakfast things, which this morning were already placed. She did not attempt to conciliate the old woman, it was not her way; she stood still thinking a moment.

Biz looked at her angrily.

"Well, Muss Heaster, I should think the muster had best know as you's down and ready, or, maybe, he'll be a-writing his fingers off, a-waiting and a-waiting in that there den, a nasty old hole as it be."

"In where?" said Hester. The idea of her father being in-doors at that time in the morning was startling enough to rouse her from even the dreamy mood that possessed her.

"Why, in his fusty old writin'-place; where

else would he be likely to be in-doors, Muss Heaster?" the old woman sneered, as openly as she dared. "Why, when I got down this morning there wurn't a bolt nor a bar undone, 'cept the parlour-door, and I looked in there, and the little closet door's shut fast."

"It always is shut. Perhaps father went out through the hall, or by the front door, he'd never be in writing the first of the morning, Biz; how can you say such a thing?"

"Well, then, please yerself, muss; go and try the other doors. Not but what I don't see as how he mayn't be a-writin', or countin'. I make no doubt he'd had unked news last night, by the look o' he. Not a soul's touched thay bolts."

"Perhaps he's ill," said Hester, her senses fairly roused. It seemed strange to her that this was the first time she had thought of his illness as likely to keep him in-doors.

She ran up to his bedroom; the bed was untouched, had not been slept in, but then Kirton was a man of peculiar habits, and if he rose by any chance a few minutes earlier than usual, he would give the spare time thus gained to making his own bed, so that Biz might have leisure for

something more profitable in the dairy or elsewhere. Hester gave a rapid glance round the room—there was nothing to show it had been occupied during the night. Without feeling really frightened, a strange chill and nervous trembling crept over her; she felt her teeth chattering as she went down-stairs again, but by a strong effort she checked this, and went into the kitchen.

“ Ere-a-mussy, Muss Heaster, 'ee looks as white, as white——”

But Hester did not listen. She quickly went into the hall, and thence to the front door to assure herself that the fastenings had not been removed, and then she stood still a few moments, her clear, practical mind now fully roused to the fact that something unusual had occurred.

The first idea that presented itself seemed the most natural, and she at once acted on its suggestions.

Her father had said more than once last night that he was over-tired, he had gone into his study, and had fallen asleep there. Without stopping to argue with herself the possibility of this or of

his having slept so long, she went through the parlour to the little door, and tried the handle.

It was, as she expected, locked on the inside.

She knocked boldly and firmly at first, for he might be sleeping soundly.

There was no answer. She went on knocking, but her hand became tremulous in spite of herself.

“Father, father,” she called, putting her lips close to the door crack, “don’t you hear me? it’s I, Hester.”

There was no answer, and she threw herself with all her strength against the door, and shook it by the handle.

Still there was no movement or answer; the dead weight of silence was fast numbing her faculties.

“Ere-a-mussy, what’s the matter? isn’t the muster inside?” said Biz, who, becoming inquisitive, had followed her.

The voice roused Hester, and again she called in an agonized voice, and again tried to force open the door, but in vain.

What had happened?

She stood still to think what was to be done. This was the only entrance; there had once been

a sliding panel from the kitchen, but her father had had that securely nailed up and whitewashed over; it would be hard to find now; the only window was a narrow slit high from the ground, not wide enough for even a child to get through, and grated besides.

There was but one way; she must transgress all her father's rules, and fetch a man to break open the door; he had always enjoined the strictest silence with regard to this den, and as none of the farm servants ever went into the parlour, they were ignorant of its existence, for as the study was built in the thickness of the wall, the door in the parlour might have been supposed only to communicate with the kitchen, doubtless its original intention.

Hester was soon across the farmyard; but agitated as she was, she was still collected, and outwardly calm. The first two men she saw, were passed by as unfit for her purpose. But coming out of the rick-yard, she met Alick, the tall broad-shouldered Irishman.

She bade him follow her at once, without giving any reason for her words.

Alick pulled his hair and stared. He was not aware of having committed any particular mis-

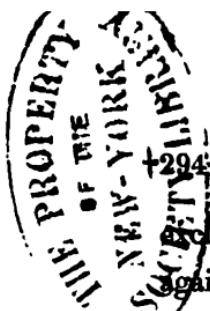
demeanor lately, but going into the farmhouse was inseparable in his mind from words and wages ; “ words ” being the term he applied to the severe lectures his master was accustomed to bestow on him, and this was not Saturday he knew well enough.

He followed Hester’s quick footsteps lumberingly, scratching his head as he went, and when he found himself in the parlour, looking round, with an awe of the darkness (for the shutters were still unopened) that made him uncertain where to step.

Hester turned round now. “ Stay, you cannot see,” and she took down one of the parlour shutters. “ You see that door, Alick. I want you to burst it open the best way you can, and then go into the kitchen, and wait for me. Do you want anything to break it open with ? ”

“ By the powers, no, miss ; now by your lave, if ye’ll stand a one side,” and almost without a pause, he ran back a few steps, and then dashing forward, sent the weight of his powerful shoulder against the door.

It groaned and creaked, but it did not yield. The Irishman rubbed his shoulder and uttered an



HESTER KIRTON.

exclamation of surprise, and then he rushed at it again with greater vehemence. This time with effect; there was a louder crash, and the lock of the door gave way.

Hester's hand was on Alick's arm in a moment.
"Go into the kitchen, Alick; I will come to you."

Biz, who had been taking down the other shutters, now stood trembling for the result of this invasion of the master's den.

Hester shut the parlour door, and looked into the study. Her father's desk was fixed on the left, and she saw him sitting before it on his high-backed chair, quiet and unmoved by all the noise.

She went up to him.

His pen was in his hand—had he fallen asleep writing?

One narrow streak of light from the high window fell on his side-face and down his arm, like a golden riband.

Was it the light, or was his face a most unnatural colour? She leant nearer, but gently; she feared to wake him suddenly. His face was ghastly.

"Father!"

She touched his hand—it was chill as ice.
Suddenly her own words flashed back upon
her ; it was the fit she had so dreaded.

In an instant she had darted to the kitchen, and
bid Alick fetch Mr. Bonham as quickly as possible,
and then come back.

She hurried again to the study, pushing by Biz,
who stood helpless and awestruck at the door.

But as she tried to take off the loosely tied
neck-cloth, for he had not fastened it up again
since last night, her hand touched his chin ; the
marble coldness appalled her. Was it—could it
be—Death that chained her father there ?

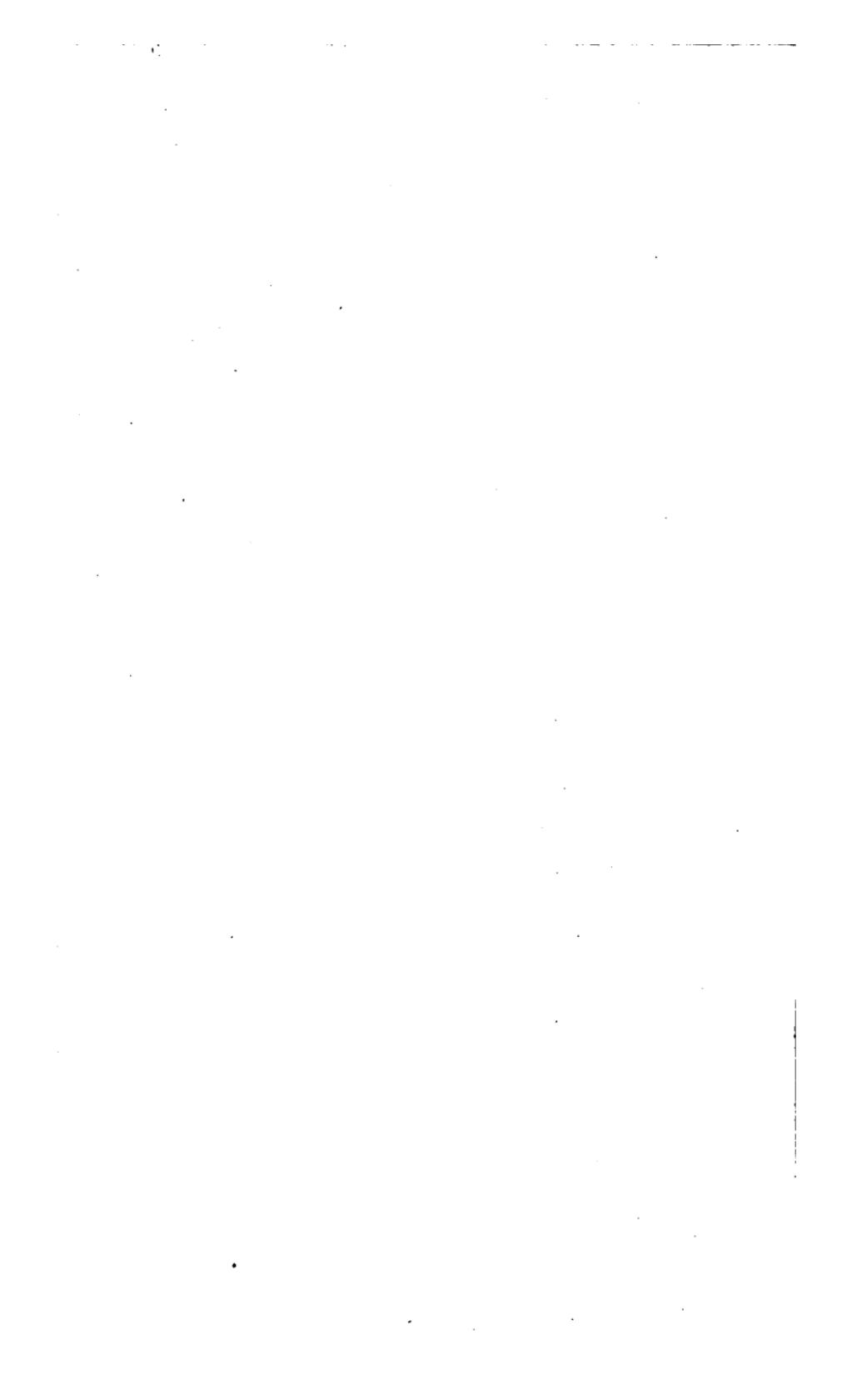
The light was still partial, but she threw herself
back on the desk to see his full face plainer—and
then she sank on the floor—not fainting, but with
a groan that brought Biz, at length roused from
her mute terror, to her assistance.

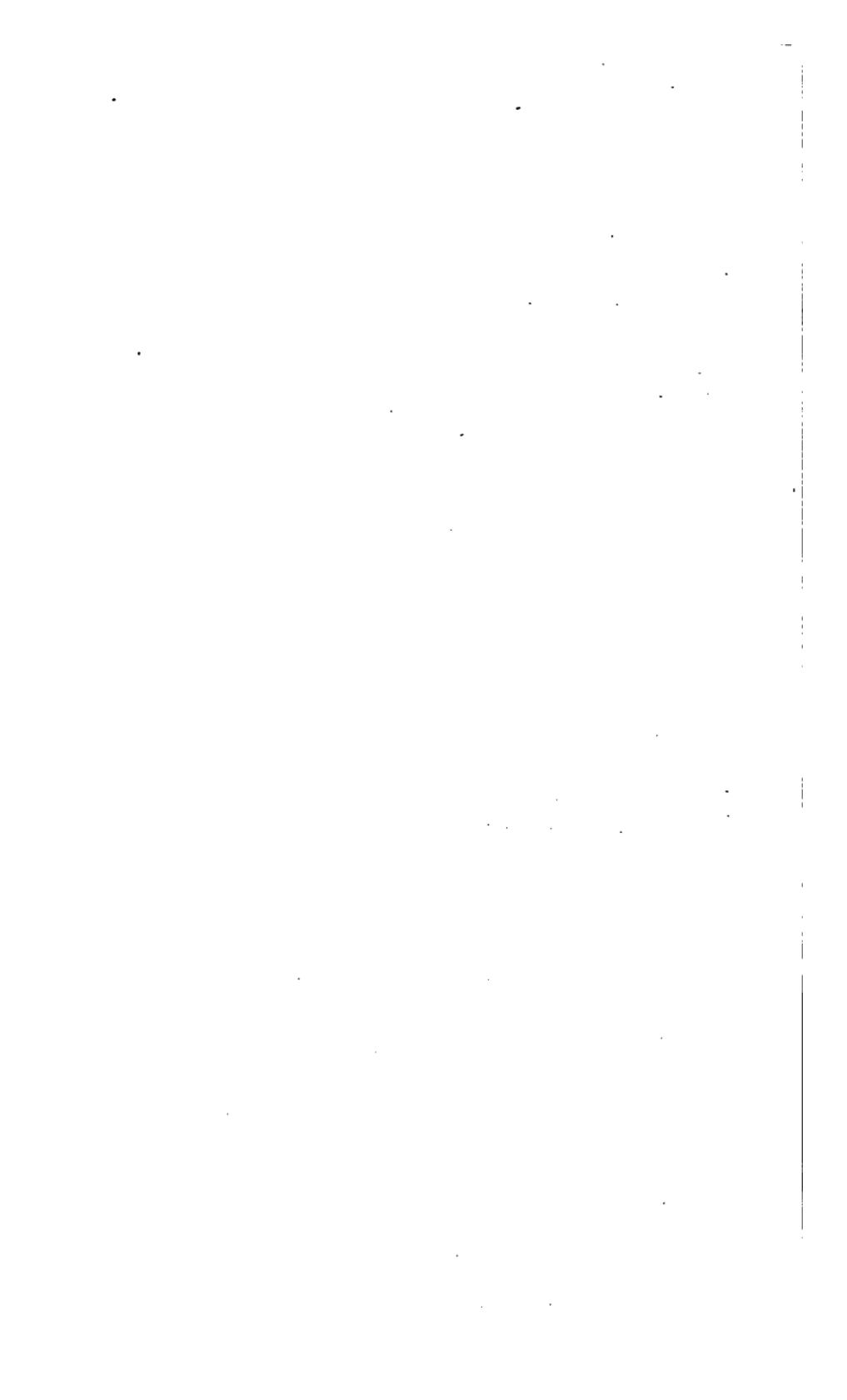
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